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[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



["I HAVE NO HOME," CORA SAID, DEVIANTLY. "DO YOU WANT ME TO FIND ONE IN THE RIVER?"]

MORE THAN A BROTHER.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY GERDA STAUNTON went to the opera that night in a dress of pure white lace, with soft white roses nestling in her bosom. She looked like a bride, her maid said, and she almost considered herself as a bride-expectant. Sir Oriol would be certain to look in before the opera was over; and during the pauses between Mozart's lovely music he could easily whisper the question which was to decide her fate. How easily she drew him on last night; drew him on from something like indifference to a lover's fervent devotion. It was only by the power of her beauty; but the knowledge was sweet to her that she had the power which all the women of her own particular world must envy her.

As she looked round the house with cold, disdainful eyes, she saw that there was no one to compare to her—no one so absolutely flawless in feature or in the grace of her tall, slender figure. There was no petty vanity in

her disposition, no untiring craving for the admiration of every man that came near her. Lady Gerda rarely stooped to an ordinary flirtation unless she had an object in view. Adoration was wearisome to her unless it came to her from the one she loved best; and though she liked Sir Oriol Paget, she knew that directly he assumed the tone of a lover she would shrink from him as the leaf of a sensitive plant contracts and quivers at the touch of a human hand. "Still, he ought to be here now," she thinks to herself, as the second act of *Don Giovanni* is coming to a close. "He can't have changed his mind!"

The door opened, and in came her brother, looking worried and anxious. He placed himself behind her chair, and remained for some time perfectly silent, apparently engrossed in listening to the music. Presently he stooped his head, and said in a low voice,—

"Tell me—you haven't been so mad as to refuse Paget?"

She drew up her long neck haughtily.

"I could scarcely refuse him till he gave me the chance."

"Then what on earth has happened to

him? I met him about an hour ago looking as blue as if he were going to be hanged. Something's up. I hope to heavens there's nothing wrong!"

"Did you ask if Miss Paget had thrown an inkstand at his head? They say she did once, and spoilt a new set of clothes."

"A pack of lies," he said, fiercely. "Good heavens, how you hate that girl, and yet she has never done you a harm in your life!"

"Hasn't she? She has spoilt my peace; she keeps me awake at night for your sake. What will become of you both, I'm always thinking? I wish to heavens you had never seen her!"

"Thanks. Life has been very different to me since I have."

"I know it has. But she has done you harm, not good! You might have settled down and married Beatrice Ashley; and now you get more reckless every day!"

"A week of Beatrice Ashley would have settled me. Before a fortnight I should have cut my throat."

"Nonsense! You might have been very happy together."



"You are mistaken," contemptuously; "narcotics never agree with me."

"Too violent a stimulant sends people mad, and I think your friend, Cora Paget, the personification —"

"I won't have a word said against her," still more fiercely.

"Hush!" said Lady Belfield, anxiously. "Don't you see that everyone is frowning at you for talking so loud? Do pay attention to the music."

"I've no time. I must be off," and Lord Fitzmaur hurriedly left the box. He walked through the broad passages and out into the starlit night with rapid steps. His brain was in a whirl, his heart in a state of wild unrest. He could not divest himself of the idea that something terrible had happened to Cora Paget. He remembered how strange and white she looked when he came up to her at the ball; how she scarcely seemed to know what she was saying or doing; how she nearly gave him a rose from her dress to his great delight, and took it away to his infinite disappointment, asking him to meet her at Wray Hall a month hence—an appointment which it was more than probable she never meant to keep. And then his thoughts went back to Sir Oriel as he had seen him that night, his face looking scared, his usually laughing eyes wild with evident anxiety.

Something had gone wrong, he was sure of that; and all his fears seemed to point with one foreboding finger towards the impulsive girl, whose special charm in the blue eyes of the man of the world consisted in the elements of danger in her passionate nature.

Presently he jumped into a hansom, and, unable to resist the temptation, drove down to Lowndes-square. The first glance told him that the ladies of the family had evidently changed their minds as to returning to Windsor, for as he passed up and down in front of No. 112, he saw that all the windows on the drawing-room floor were lighted up. He waited and waited, but still the lights burned in the drawing-room—still Sir Oriel showed no sign of return.

At last it struck him that Lady Paget might be safe in bed, and he might be able to get some information from a sleepy footman. He had no excuse for his own anxiety, he knew—only an absurd conviction, an overpowering presentiment of evil. Doubtfully he walked up the steps and gave a rapid knock. The door flew open as if the butler had been waiting in the hall, but before he could ask for Sir Oriel a voice came from over the banisters, which he instantly recognised as Lady Paget's.

"Have you found her? For Heaven's sake tell me at once!"

"It's I—Fitzmaur, Lady Paget," he said, stepping forward, though Mason felt half inclined to stop him. "Is there anything I can do for you? I'm entirely at your service." His heart throbbed with intense eagerness, and his ears were strained to catch the slightest sound, for he felt on the threshold of a secret, and he knew that it was Cora who was lost.

There was a perceptible change in Lady Paget's voice, as she answered, coldly,—

"Nothing, thank you. Lord Fitzmaur, I am sorry to say my son is out if you wish to see him."

"Can I take a message for you to his club?"

"Thank you. I don't suppose he is at his club, and I have no message to send."

He had nothing to say but "good evening," and nothing to do but to retire, for it was evident that Lady Paget had no intention of continuing a conversation on the stairs, or of asking him into the drawing-room. He heard the rustle of her silk dress on the landing, the close of a door, and then turned to Mason; but the butler looked the embodiment of incorruptibility, and the sovereign which he had prepared to slip into his hand found its way back to his waistcoat pocket.

As he turned out of the square he came

upon two men talking earnestly at the corner, and he quickly recognized the voices of Sir Oriel Paget and Raymond Lovell. He caught the words, "200, Norfolk-street, Strand. I heard them tell her to go there, and I suppose she went."

It was Lovell who was talking, and it seemed to Lord Fitzmaur as if he must be speaking of Cora. He walked on fast, and hailed the first hansom he came across. He had no definite plan in his reckless breast. His only thought was to get to her before any of her belongings. She was certain to be lonely and desolate by this time, and she would give him such a welcome as he never would have a chance of getting under any other circumstances.

It was a long distance from Lowndes-square to Norfolk-street, and as he pulled out his watch when they came to Charing Cross he found it was nearly midnight—certainly an unusual hour for calling on a lady. Still he pictured her sobbing her heart out on a horse-hair sofa in a dingy lodging, and determined to persevere.

Ah! how delicious it would be to play the part of comforter, to wipe the tears from her glorious eyes, to bring back the smiles to her lovely lips, to hear her soft, rich voice thanking him as she had never thanked a man before! Surely her pride would be lowered then, and she would allow herself to be gracious and sweet to him as she had never been during all the course of their acquaintance.

He sprang out a step before the driver had pulled up in Norfolk-street, and woke the echoes of the street by a resounding knock. To his impatience it seemed a long time before it was answered. A woman came to the door, who looked like a third-rate housekeeper, shined in a faded brown garment, imperfectly fastened about the neck, as if Lord Fitzmaur's knock had disturbed her when she had taken the first steps towards retiring for the night. He looked at her critically, and thanked his stars that Miss Paget was not likely to be long under her most ardent care.

"Did a lady come here and ask for lodgings some time in the course of the day?"

"If you mean a young person who was brazen enough to want me to take her in without so much as a line of recommendation from a soul, I consent her marching!"

"Good heavens! then she isn't here now?" his heart sinking in utter dismay.

"No she isn't. I knew she was just the sort that the gentlemen —"

"You are utterly mistaken!" breaking in upon her homily, as the blood rushed into his face.

"She's as pure and innocent as a baby a few months old, and if you've turned her out upon the streets you've done a devil's work, I can tell you!"

The woman looked uncomfortable, but she said, doggedly,—

"No fault of mine. This is a respectable house, and we want no —"

"Curse your respectability. Don't you know that if you insulted a high-spirited girl, used to nothing but respect and reverence, it would cut her so to the quick that she would scarcely be answerable for her actions?" His eyes blaring with anger. "Which way did she go?"

"Down towards the Embankment. Maybe she's sitting on one of the seats there now. She said she was mortal tired. You'll catch her if you look sharp. Anyhow I can't stand here talking all night, so I'll wish you 'good-evening!' and, with a surly nod, she slammed the door in his face.

His heart was heavy within him, as he told the driver to go to the Embankment. It was a mere wild-goose chase, for he could not tell which way to turn when he got to the bottom of the narrow street.

In a fit of repentance she might have turned her face westwards, and gone back humbly to her own home. From what he knew of her character he did not think it likely that she would give in so soon.

It was more probable that she would turn

eastwards, further and further from the haunts of civilisation, not caring in the least whether she went, so long as she left mile upon mile between herself and the people she loved.

Another alternative presented itself to his mind, but that was so terrible that he would not allow himself to dwell upon it.

In utter despair and weariness of spirit she might have cast her reckless young self into the water—another burden for the old mid-stained river to bear on its breast down to the shining sea.

There need only be one splash—a cry of agony—and then the end would come; and one more soul out of the countless thousands in that vast city would have gone to the Maker who gave it.

He got out of the cab with a shudder; and, telling the man to wait, walked on, looking to right and left at the passers-by, or at the sea in the shadow—looking and fearing and hoping till his heart gave a jump, and his feet stood still as he saw the light of a gas-lamp falling on a white, weary face, from out of which shone two splendid eyes, like stars dropped down from Heaven!

CHAPTER VIII.

UNTIL forlorn and miserable, Cora Paget had traversed the unfriendly streets till her feet refused to take her any further. Over Battersea-bridge she went to Battersea-park, and watched, with eyes that saw nothing the games at play of numerous bands of children, who made the place resound with their joyous shouts.

She sat on a seat, looking straight before her. Two faces were constantly passing before her mental vision—one supremely fair, with the beauty of perfect form and complexion; the other not half so handsome, but with something in the dark blue eyes, the kindly mouth, which made it worth all the world to some people.

Sometimes they were in a ball-room together, and the band was playing the last popular waltz; sometimes they were side by side before the altar, and the pealing tones of the Wedding March were sounding sonorously from under grey robes of stonework.

Yes, Oriel loved her. She saw it in the expression of his eyes, as he stood with the broken fan in his hand; she saw it in the smile upon his lip, as he caught sight of the fragment of mother-of-pearl on the library carpet.

And if it were for his happiness she could have schooled herself to bear it—schooled herself to bear anything but to see him tricked, and fooled, and doped, by a woman who cared not a straw for the kindly, chivalrous gentleman, only for the money at his banker's, the broad acres he called his own!

And then the tears came into her eyes, and her heart swelled within her bosom, as she thought of the harsh words he had said to her—in his anger. Would there be peace now that she was out of the house—peace now that he could not tell if she were well or ill, sorry or dead? There would be no one to talk to him about his horses, or about the dogs—no one to go early and late to the stables to see if the puppies were doing well.

When he went away there would no longer be a second self left behind to look after all his special properties, and see that none of his pets died of neglect. He must miss her constantly every hour of the day—rot in London, where he had heaps of friends; and where their diversions for the most part lay in different directions, but down at Wray Hall, where she was associated with every pursuit, and there was not a pleasure in which she did not have her share.

There would be no one to catch up a racquet, and play a game of tennis on the spur of the moment, in the early freshness of the morning; no one to take a cue at billiards, when a promiscuous shower stopped the outdoor games.

Of course, friends would be invited down from town, and neighbours would drop in occasionally; but there would be no one constantly within reach, no one for ever at his beck and call. He would miss her, of course; and when he missed her, perhaps he would be sorry—sorry that he had sent her away, like a faithful servant discharged on the spur of the moment without a character.

All through the long day, as she went from the shady park into the dusty streets, anxious to hide herself in the busy throng of the city, she asked that one incessant question of her own inner self, "Would he be sorry?" A handsome girl with a haughty bearing as if she were an empress just stepped from her imperial carriage, was certain not to pass unmolested through our crowded thoroughfares. Fortunately, Cora was so thoroughly engrossed with her own thoughts that she never heard any of the impertinent remarks that were made by men who were attracted by her beauty, and emboldened by her unprotected state. Only once was she completely roused, and that was when a cowardly ruffian barred her way with an impudent smile. She flashed upon him one look of indignant scorn, which was quite enough to send him away in a depressed condition, like a dog with his tail between his legs; and then, with a shiver, walked on, with her dusky head half an inch higher.

Along the southern bank of the Thames she tramped through odd-looking streets, the names of which she did not know. She had tasted nothing that whole day, and starvation began to tell upon her. Suddenly her legs seemed to be giving way under her, and her head swam.

Terrified lest she should fall down in the unfamiliar street, and be carried by unwashed hands into some filthy hovel, she went into the nearest baker's shop, and asked for a roll. The woman behind the counter, noticing how white she looked, begged her to sit down, and fetched her a glass of water.

Cora could not talk, and the baker's wife, being too busy to be curious, refrained from asking any questions. After eating the fresh, wholesome bread, she felt better; and, having drained the last drop of water out of the tumbler with thirsty lips, she thought she would pay for her modest refreshment, and depart again on her lonely way.

She put her hand into her pocket, but there was no purse there. She opened her bag and rummaged about amongst its contents, the colour rushing into her white cheeks, the tears into her eyes. A photograph fell down upon the floor.

It was the portrait of Sir Oriel Paget taken in a shooting-coat, cigar in hand, and sitting on the edge of a table. Somebody picked it up and handed to her with a smile. She snatched it with such an eager gesture it might have been a jewel of great price, instead of a simple *carte-de-visite* of the value, perhaps, of half-a-crown, if taken at an expensive place.

The photograph hidden away, she relapsed into her previous dismay.

Her purse was nowhere to be seen, and the startling idea forced itself upon her that in her wild haste to leave her only home she had begun her battle with the world without a penny in her pocket!

In her fright, lest she should be taken for a cheat, she burst into tears, and told the baker's wife she could not pay her.

The woman looked at her curiously, then, seeing that this was a genuine case, and no attempted fraud, she laid her rough hand on the girl's shoulder, and said, kindly,—

"Never mind, my dear, you get to your home as fast as you can. You are not fit to be walking the streets without a mother at your elbow. Lor, don't thank me—twopenny is not a fortune; and someday—maybe when you are passing this way—you'll look in and say,—

"Mrs. Brown, here's your money. I've not forgotten my purse to-day."

Cora thanked her fervently, and promised the small debt should soon be paid, her desolate heart for a moment feeling a little lightened by the stranger's kindness.

Scrupulously she took down the name and address, the baker's wife watching her with an amused smile; and then she started off again.

This time she was intent upon getting back to the other bank of the Thames, for she realised that she must part with some article of jewellery, in order to be able to pay for a night's lodging.

She crossed Westminster Bridge amidst a jostling crowd, and made her way to the Strand. Then she stepped into the first jeweller's she came across, for she was anxious to get out of such a public thoroughfare where she might be seen by some friend or acquaintance.

After a short discussion she came out minus her gold bracelet, but plus a small sum of money which she slipped into her bag. She had not an idea that Raymond Lovell was in the shop, but hurried away, thankful that she was no longer penniless, and that she had so far escaped undetected.

Once located in the lodging which the jeweller's foreman had recommended to her, she thought she would have time to think, and make some plan for the future.

It was impossible to do either in a crowded street; but as soon as she had gained a shelter for her head she would settle some plan of action.

How late it was getting, and how the people stared, just as if she were some unknown wild beast taking its walks abroad, after having escaped from a menagerie!

Norfolk-street was very quiet; not a soul was to be seen from one end of it to the other, but the houses looked dark and dingy to the poor girl's frightened gaze.

It came across her with a shudder that perhaps for the future she would always have to live in some gloomy place like this, in order to hide herself from her cousin.

Of course he would feel bound to come after her, and try to find her; and if he found her he would be sure to try and make her come back.

But she must be firm, and refuse to yield; she must steel herself to resist him. He had said there was no peace for anyone so long as she was in the house, therefore she must keep away from it—keep from it as if she had the plague about her, and would be likely to give it to Lady Paget as well as to her only son.

With a deep drawn, hopeless sigh she stopped, and went up to a shabby-looking door, and knocked.

Three minutes later she was walking fast down the street, her head thrown back, her eyes flashing fire, her hand clenching tightly the handle of her bag.

The wretched lodging-house keeper had insulted her, and told her to go about her business; she never let her lodgings to young women at that time of the night—it was a respectable house, &c., &c. Cora felt like a thorough-bred who first feels the touch of a whip.

The young hot blood coursed wildly through her veins; her brain was in a whirl; her indignant heart cried out for vengeance—vengeance on the stranger who had tried to fix the brand of infamy on her pure young soul. Oh! what had she done to be treated like this! Where could she go and hide herself? Was she to go shelterless for the rest of her life because she needed a shelter more than anyone else in the world?

She threw herself down on the first seat she came to on the Embankment, and sat in a dark corner, her hands clasped tightly over her bag, her delicate eyebrows drawn close together, her dark eyes fixed on the ground at her feet. And sitting there lonely, hungry, weary and wretched, she pictured her rival at some ball or some other brilliant assemblage, beautiful, radiant, her lips wreathed with

smiles, witty speeches falling every now and then from her lovely mouth; dressed in splendid garments studded with jewels, surrounded by a throng of eager men, all anxious to catch a word or a smile on its way to someone else. And perhaps Oriel would be there—having broken his promise to go down to Windsor—for was it likely that a man would absent himself willingly from a woman he loved?

Yes, he was certain to be there, at once more favoured and yet more eager than all the rest, his eyes fixed in passionate admiration on the beautiful face, which would be as fatal as the mermaids of old who lured their lovers under the waves by their shining hair—beauty beckoning to a grave!

Utterly tired out, she fell asleep at last, her head drooping on her chest, her bosom heaving with long drawn breaths. Sitting there in her desolation, she dreamt of home and love and happiness. There was a smile on her lips when she was roused by a policeman, who told her she must be moving. Feeling a man's hand on her shoulder she started to her feet, and looked round with bewildered eyes.

"You must move on, miss? You had better get to your home as fast as you can," he said, gruffly, but not unkindly.

Home! The word stabbed her like a knife. "I have no home," she said, defiantly, though her voice was hoarse with weariness. "Do you want me to find one in the river?"

"Miss Paget! Thank Heaven, I've found you!" said a voice close to her elbows, and turning round with throbbing heart, she found herself face to face with Lord Fitzmaur!

The policeman looked from one to the other—from the tall, aristocratic man to the refined, girlish figure—and walked away with a grin.

CHAPTER IX.

"This is no place for you," began Lord Fitzmaur eagerly, all the better feelings of his reckless nature working within him at the sight of the girl he loved, alone and unprotected at midnight on the Thames Embankment.

"There is no place for me in the world," she said, in bitter mockery of her own position—burning with shame at having been discovered by the Earl.

"Yes, there is!" and his voice was lowered to the softest tone, whilst his dark eyes glowed with passionate tenderness. "There is a place always waiting for you by my side!"

"Don't talk to me like that," she said, her voice almost harsh with pain. "I'm no longer Miss Paget, niece to Lady Paget of Wray Hall! I'm an outcast, without a penny or a home. Perhaps I shall go about with flowers in the streets! Will you promise to give me a shilling for a button-hole?"

"Don't!" he said, with a frown and a glance over his shoulder, for he was afraid that Sir Oriel and Raymond Lovell would arrive in a minute. "You must listen to me, Miss Paget. You can't stay here. You can't go to an hotel alone! Will you come to my mother's in Grosvenor-street?"

"Thank you. I could not face Lady Belfield's look of ineffable surprise. I—I shall take care of myself," and she turned away with as much apparent confidence as if her carriage were waiting round the corner.

"That is nonsense! You can't take care of yourself," placing himself before her.

"It seems to me I must," with a small smile about her tired lips. "There is no one else to do it!"

"There is! Give yourself to me, darling, and I'll take care of you better than anyone else!"

"No, Lord Fitzmaur," as a vivid blush stole up into her cheeks. "I've made a mess of my own life, nothing would induce me to make a mess of yours. Let me go," looking

with frightened eyes into the darkness, "it is so late!"

"Yes, it is so late. And you are here all alone! If I didn't care for you a straw, do you think I should be brute enough to leave you like this? Come with me, dear! I'll do the best I can for you. An old servant of ours has a cottage at Richmond. She will take you in with pleasure, and you can stay there as long as you like. I shall be there as often as I can. You can trust me for that. Come, there isn't a moment to be lost!"

"No, I can't do that," she said, slowly. "Your sister would tell Oriol, and he must never know where I am," and yet her resolution was nearly failing her, for she was so exhausted she could scarcely stand, and rest and shelter were growing absolutely necessary—only her pride kept her up.

"No, my sister would know nothing about it," with a slight smile about his lips. "Not a soul should know where you were except myself. Think what it would be 'you and I together' apart from all the world?"

She threw back her head with a startled air.

"I don't think that would do," in a doubtful tone. "If I could be alone there—quite alone with your old servant—I should like it very much."

"You should be alone—didn't I say so? Only I would look you up every now and then, just to see if you were all right and comfortable; and then, when things looked a little brighter, perhaps then, dearest, we could slip into a church and get married!" trying to catch hold of her hands.

She snatched them away, blushing furiously.

"No, no, that could never be!"

"Well, we needn't look so far ahead, need we? But we must start at once for Richmond." Drawing a whistle out of his pocket he whistled loudly, and the hansom which he had dismissed a few minutes before came up directly. "Now let me hand you in!"

Cora hesitated, some instinct holding her back, although there really seemed to her, in her inexperience, that there was no alternative.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Only—only if I might go alone, perhaps it would be better," confused, and more than half afraid of the consequences which might follow on a step which yet seemed necessary.

"Impossible!" he said, decidedly. "Mrs. Watson would be fast asleep. I should have to thunder at her door in order to wake her up, and what reception do you imagine she would give to you—an utter stranger—if you appeared alone in the small hours?"

"But I could say you sent me?"

"That would never do. I must be there to talk her over. Do you grudge me the pleasure of being with you for an hour or so on the way, or what on earth is it that holds you back? Are you so in love with your position here, alone and at the mercy of every ruffian who prowls about at night? Are you afraid of me? Don't you know that I love you, that I would die to help you," speaking rapidly—carried away by the passion which leapt into flame in his wild heart. "Cora, my darling, come!"

Again he took hold of her hand and held it fast, looking down into her lovely face with glowing eyes.

"Lord Fitzmaur," she said, quietly, though she was shaking with a nervous tremor from head to foot, "I will come with you, on one condition."

"What is it? Nothing too cruel, I hope?"

"Only this; that if I come you will treat me with—with the same respect as ever," drawing up her neck; "and that you will let me go as soon as I have found some other respectable home to go to. I don't suppose I should be a beggar. I suppose I have some money somewhere in a bank, so that I could pay somebody to be my companion."

"What a happy idea!" with a mocking smile. "Only come, and we will settle the conditions afterwards. I don't suppose Mrs.

Watson will keep you under lock and key. Come, there's no time to lose!"

He almost dragged her to the cab in his great eagerness, but still she drew back unwillingly.

"I can't—I can't!" she almost sobbed.

"Oh, is there no other way?"

"None whatever!" biting his lip in wild impatience. "You must come, Cora, my own!"

"Stop!" cried a voice, which made her heart leap in her bosom, whilst a hand, whose touch thrilled her through and through, was laid upon her arm. "Where are you taking her? I am here to take charge of my cousin!"

"Miss Paget was wandering about alone at this time of night," said Lord Fitzmaur, sullenly, "and I thought an old servant's house would be better than none."

He felt at the moment as if he could have sprung on the young Baronet and strangled him. The prize which he had been longing for so madly was already in his grasp, when Sir Oriol came to steal it from him!

Cora stood like a statue with drooping head, whilst Raymond Lovell watched the scene with curious eyes, wondering what would be the dénouement.

"You are very good!" said Sir Oriol—but there was something in his tone which showed that he looked on the Earl's ready services with suspicious eyes—"but I can relieve you of all further trouble. My cousin and I had a little tiff this morning," with a pleasant smile, "and if you will let us have your hansom, we should like to make it up on our way home."

"Take it, by all means. Good-bye, Miss Paget."

She bent her head as she was handed into the cab, but she could not speak or even give him a look. Her whole mind was set upon trying to keep up and not disgrace herself by a burst of tears, whilst he looked after her, his whole heart in his eyes, to find himself, as he thought, entirely forgotten because that other, his sister's lover, had sprung up in his path.

Sir Oriol took his place beside Cora, and slammed the doors. Then, with a word to the two men, he leant back, and the driver turned his horse's head, and drove off in the direction of Lowndes-square.

"Good night, Fitzmaur!" said Lovell. "As it's so late I shall go and turn in. Don't feel inclined to come up to my diggings and have a smoke?"

"Thanks; I've got an internal headache, and I think I shall see what a walk will do for me. No use going to bed, I shouldn't sleep a wink. Good night! I wish Paget were at the bottom of the sea!" he blurted out, savagely.

Lovell laughed.

"Do you? So do I!" and then he turned to the left—towards King's Bench Walk—thoroughly understanding the Earl's feelings, and wondering what would have happened to Cora Paget if they had come up only half-a-minute later. He could not have meant any harm; but, to say the least, the position had looked a little "fahy."

And then his thoughts went back to their usual magnet, and he wished that Paget would take the rose which was so willing to fall into his hand, and not stretch out his arm for that other which grew on the higher branch. It might never belong to him, Raymond Lovell, but at least it had seemed to belong to him once, and he could never bear to see it in possession of any other.

And then he bethought him of the two thousand pounds in his pocket, and felt as rich as Croesus. Wouldn't they bring freedom for a year, at least for the girl he loved, and peace for the same length of time for his own jealous heart? And wasn't twelve months of happiness cheaply bought, whatever the price?

He was happy when he threw himself down on his bed, and happy when he woke the next morning, and he never cast one regretful glance to the empty place on the shelf, where

the casket containing his mother's jewels had always stood.

Meanwhile the hansom was pursuing its way towards Lowndes-square.

Sir Oriol's feelings were of a complex description, but owing to the great relief he felt at finding her he freely forgave his cousin all trouble she had caused him.

After a few minutes of silence, he turned to her, with an attempt of grave reproach in his eyes.

"Child, how could you?"

That was all he said, but the next moment his arm was round her, and he drew her lovingly closer to his side.

Then the pent-up sobs broke forth, and she cried out her sorrow and repentance on his breast.

He was almost alarmed at the vehemence of her emotion, and every scrap of anger melted from his heart. He told himself that he was a fool to expect her to behave like a woman, when she was nothing but an impulsive child; and, drawing her face up to his, he kissed her tenderly, as he used to do in the old days when they were children together.

Ah! how her poor, foolish heart leapt within her breast as the crimson blood flooded her white little face; and hunger and weariness, and sorrow and fear, were all forgotten in the ecstasy and rapture of her passionate love!

"Never do it again, dear!" he whispered, "Promise me that? I couldn't stand it!"

"Never again!" she whispered back. "Oh, Oriol, if you wanted me from the grave, I believe that death couldn't keep me from you."

(To be continued.)

LADY LILITH.

—:—

CHAPTER XXX.

It is now time to indicate the whereabouts of Marcella, whose independent action had surprised herself quite as much as her relatives. She was never able to tell afterwards how she screwed up sufficient courage to take such a decisive step as leaving her home, and only the desperate nature of her situation can explain it.

If she had but known that Sir Horace was playing with her, that she was merely the cat-paw by whose aid he intended pulling the chestnuts out of the fire, she would have been, comparatively speaking, happy; but, of course, neither she nor her mother suspected the true facts of the case; and poor Marcella, in imagination, saw herself dragged to the altar an unwilling bride, who would far more readily have assumed the veil of the nun than take upon herself the duties of Sir Horace Dalton's wife!

Her appeal to Lilith had done no good—had only, indeed, provoked a lecture from her mother, who loudly declared she had no patience with her daughter's folly; and in- stinct, rather than reason, told the young girl that to apply to Sir Horace himself would be productive of no more advantage.

She had only herself to rely upon, and, maybe, it was this very fact that endued her with a spurt of unusual courage.

She knew Arthur Calvert's mother was a widow, living at Dover, and, from what the young artist had told her, she fancied Mrs. Calvert must be a woman of kindly feelings and brave nature. To her she therefore determined to apply; and having once come to this resolution, she began to lay her plans with a method and coolness that certainly could not have been expected of her.

She procured a Bradshaw, found out what time the trains left Victoria, fixed on the one by which she would travel, and the day on which she would make her venture, and then packed together the few articles of wearing

apparel she intended taking with her, and prepared herself to await the moment with what calmness she might.

She knew how furious Lady Lester would be when she found out what had happened; and if by any chance her plan failed, Marcella was quite aware that in future she would be virtually a prisoner, for her mother would certainly not give her a second chance of escaping from her authority.

The evening of her flight arrived. She and Lady Lester had accepted an invitation to dinner, but when the time came for getting ready, she urged a headache as an excuse for not going out; and her mother, seeing her white face and trembling lips, decided that as she looked singularly unlike a prospective bride, it would be much better that she should not show herself in public.

"Still, I can't go without you," added Lady Lester, deeply to Marcella's disappointment; "so I will make out the list of guests to be invited to your wedding-breakfast—and that will take me pretty well all the evening."

"I think I will go to bed," said Marcella, and to this Lady Lester made no objection, but impressed a cold kiss on her daughter's brow, and then went downstairs, leaving Marcella alone.

The young girl looked her door, then hastily changed her dress for a thick cloth travelling gown, with a dark hat and jacket to match. Her fingers trembled, but her new-born courage never once failed—having resolved on a certain course, it was not half so difficult as she imagined to go straight on with it. Then she turned out the gas, and sat quite still in the darkness, waiting until her mother was at dinner before she slipped out.

She would have to risk being seen by the servants; but after all, the risk was not so very great, for the staff of domestics was small—Lady Lester not having thought it worth while to engage the usual complement of servants during the short time she would be in town.

Presently the clock struck eight, and immediately afterwards the dinner gong sounded. Marcella began to breathe more freely, waited for ten minutes, and was just going to unlock the door, when the handle was turned from the outside.

"Who is there?" she asked, in consternation.

"I," answered the voice of her mother, "you had better have something to eat, for I have just remembered that you made a very poor luncheon, and I don't want to have you ill on my hands just now. Slip on a tea-gown and come downstairs—it will not matter, as no one is likely to see you. And a glass of champagne may take away your headache."

Marcella crept on the bed, and answered from it,—

"I am in bed, and I couldn't eat anything however much I tried. If you like I will have a cup of coffee when you have yours."

She knew this would not be until nearly ten o'clock, and by that time she hoped to be in the train on her way to Dover!

Lady Lester went down again, without further remonstrance, and a quarter of an hour afterwards Marcella slipped from the room down the front staircase, and into the hall. Her heart beat quickly as she passed the door of the room where her mother sat at dinner, and suddenly seemed to stop, as the door opened!

She slid behind a marble statue, knowing full well, however, that if it was her mother her quick eye would certainly spy her out. Luckily, it was not Lady Lester, but a footman bringing out a dish, and he passed carelessly on, intent on nothing but his burden.

With his disappearance into the back regions came the young girl's opportunity, and in a few more minutes she stood on the pavement outside, hailing a hansom, which chanced to be passing.

It was very strange to find herself alone in the vehicle—such an experience had never

before befallen her, and in spite of her terrors of discovery Marcella could not help yielding to the pleasurable sensations that, in youth, always accompany novelty.

She paid the driver—astonishing him by the liberality of her tip—then made her way through the intricacies of the crowd to the ticket office, and took her ticket for Dover, gaining fresh confidence with each minute that passed. It was rather awful waiting, first in the crowd, and then in the train, but at last the latter started, and she was really on her way beyond the reach of pursuit!

She breathed a sigh of deep relief, but the relief was short-lived; for no sooner did she feel herself safe from her mother than doubts began to assail her with regard to the reception she was likely to meet with from Mrs. Calvert.

Suppose the widow should look upon her flight as the foolish and romantic escapade of a schoolgirl, and refuse to take her in? What resource would be left to her? None, save a return to her mother, and the old bondage. Still, there might be this advantage—Sir Horace would think she had disgraced herself by leaving home, and in that case he would perhaps break off the engagement. If this happened, Marcella felt her attempt would not have been made in vain.

The journey from London to Dover is not a very long one, but to Marcella it seemed shorter than it really was; for as she neared her destination her fears grew greater, and her cowardice returned. She almost wished she had never taken this decisive step.

However, it was too late for repentance; and the only thing to do when she reached Dover was to take a cab, and drive straight to Mrs. Calvert's residence—a distance of some half-a-mile from the station.

It was a small detached house, standing a little way back from the road; and the light from the sitting-room streamed out through red blinds with singularly cheerful effect—a good omen, Marcella judged it to be.

She paid and dismissed the cabman, and then stood hesitating at the gate—a forlorn little creature enough, shivering with cold and excitement, and holding in her hand the small black bag that contained the whole of the worldly goods she had brought with her.

Without any warning the door opened, and outlined against the hall light Marcella saw a woman's figure—a slim, even girlish figure, whose youthfulness, however, was contradicted by the grey hair and widow's cap that crowned it.

This, Marcella felt, must be Mrs. Calvert, and her surmise was correct. The widow had heard the sound of the cab wheels, and had come to see what it meant.

"Who is that?" said a soft voice, and the speaker came down the two steps, and looked wonderingly at Marcella. "Have you lost your way my dear?" she added, kindly; for even the dim light did not deceive her into thinking her unexpected visitor either a beggar or a tramp.

"No," the young girl answered, hesitatingly; "I am here to see—Mrs. Calvert."

"To see me?" in astonishment. "Surely you have made a mistake? To the best of my belief I do not know you!"

"Not personally, but perhaps you have heard my name. It is Marcella Lester!"

Mrs. Calvert started, and seemed more and more surprised.

"Yes, my dear, I have heard your name, but I certainly did not expect to see you," she answered, in a troubled voice. "Come in, and tell me why you have sought me."

She drew her inside a cosy little parlour, and, with a glad flash of delight, Marcella saw her own face smiling at her from over the mantelpiece—Arthur's work, done in water-colours, and idealised as lovers have a trick of idealising their sweethearts. Still the likeness was unmistakable, and as a proof of Arthur's love, it encouraged Marcella in the story she had to tell.

"I am come to ask your protection," she

said, sinking down on her knees beside the widow's chair, while Mrs. Calvert gently unloosed her jacket and furs—looking all the while deeply concerned—and then the young girl poured forth the history of her mother's persecution (for it was nothing less), and her hearer's heart began to beat with indignation against the woman who was willing to barter her daughter's heart for gold and a title.

"I know I have no claim on you," said Marcella, piteously, in conclusion, "but I have come to you because there was no one else to whom I could go. Will you let me stay with you for a little while—a month or two? I am quite willing to try and do something to earn my own living. I can sew quite nicely, and I think I play well enough to give lessons on the piano."

Mrs. Calvert silenced her with a kiss, and then sat for a little quite silent, thinking over the position—which would not have been quite such a difficult one, but for a threatened complication of which Marcella knew nothing.

The widow felt almost bewildered at this sudden invasion of her quiet life. Since her husband's death, some ten years ago, she had completely withdrawn from the world, and lived simply for her son. Of course she knew from him of his affection for his former pupil, and she had done her best to persuade him to overcome it, for there seemed little probability of Lady Lester's daughter ever being permitted to wed a penniless artist like Arthur Calvert.

Arthur, however, with the buoyancy of youth, had refused to accept her view of the matter.

"You don't know Marcella," he had said, "but I do, and I am sure she will be true to me."

And lo! here was Marcella herself, come for the sole purpose of vindicating her truth!

"I would be quite willing to keep you here as long as you would stay," said the widow, at last, laying a gentle hand on the girl's head; "but there is one consideration that does not seem to have struck you. Don't you think it likely that your mother will suspect where you are, and come and take you away?"

"But you won't let her—you will hide me?" sobbed Marcella, in consequence.

"My dear child, you ask me to do something for which I have neither the inclination nor the power. Recollect, Lady Lester is your mother, and I could not reconcile it to my conscience to defy her authority, however much I might condemn the way she exercised it. Besides, you are under twenty-one, and the law would give her the right to take you away."

Poor Marcella sank down on the floor in a very abandonment of sorrow, and it was at this moment the outer door was opened, and a quick, masculine step sounded in the passage. Marcella sprang up with a half-delirious cry of joy, and threw herself into the arms of a tall, dark, young man, who was standing, transfixed with astonishment, on the threshold.

"Arthur—Arthur—you will save me. You will not let my mother take me away!" she cried, incoherently, as his arms tightened round her, and he strained her to his breast while Mrs. Calvert could only sigh, and wonder what the end of it would be.

For Arthur Calvert had come back from Rome only the day before, and it was his return from his walk that his mother had dreaded as she talked to Marcella.

She felt now that the stream of destiny was too strong for her to resist, for when her son heard Marcella's hasty reasons for her flight, he said very decidedly,—

"There is only one solution of the difficulty. You must marry me, Marcella, without delay!"

"But I am under age, Arthur!"

"We must risk that. I will get a special licence to-morrow morning, and before night you shall be my wife, and then no one can take you from me!"

"Do nothing without thinking of the consequences," urged his mother, in one of those

copy-book precepts that Arthur had learned to know, but he only smiled—a little contemptuously.

"The consequences will fall on me, not Marcella," he answered, "and there is no alternative but our marriage." Do you think," he added, fiercely, "that I will let her go back to be badgered and bullied by her mother, as she has been lately? If I did, I should be unworthy of the name of man!"

Mrs. Calvert sighed, and said nothing. Privately, she wondered what her son could possibly see in this little pale-faced thing to inspire such deep affection as he undoubtedly bore towards her. She forgot that love is blind, and clothes its object with its own beauty!

"What a brave little girl you are!" added Arthur, with a fond smile to Marcella. "I had no idea you would prove such a heroine. It was a lucky thing for us both that I returned from Rome yesterday!"

"What made you come back?" she asked, nestling closer down in his arms, for by this time Mr. Calvert, conscious that she was in the way, had retired, ostensibly for the purpose of giving her maid instructions about supper.

"I came back because an English nobleman, who had seen some of my pictures, has commissioned me to paint the portraits of his family. He is going to pay me most generously, so you see we shall have something to live on when we are married! But that is not the only thing, for I hope that my commission will bring me both fame and fortune."

Although Lady Lester travelled as fast as express trains could carry her, and took a cab from the Dover station to Mrs. Calvert's miniature residence, she did not arrive there until nearly six o'clock—just as the trio were sitting down to dinner. She did not wait to be announced, anxiety and anger made her forget her usual polite manners; and without ceremony she brushed past the startled little servant who had opened the door to her, and guided by the sound of voices entered the dining room, on whose threshold she paused.

A feast of unusual magnificence was in progress. The table was laden with flowers and fruit, and Arthur Calvert was in the act of pouring Champagne into Marcella's glass.

He paused in the middle of the operation, while his mother half rose from her chair in unconcealed trepidation, and Marcella laid a trembling hand on the young man's arm.

"So," exclaimed Lady Lester, harshly, "I have found you at last! Are you not ashamed of your disgraceful conduct, and all the trouble you have caused me?" She waited a minute, then added, peremptorily, "Go and put your things on, and prepare to return with me at once. As for you, madam," turning to Mrs. Calvert, "I cannot congratulate you on the good taste or sense of duty that allowed you to encourage a daughter's rebellion against a mother's authority!"

"Indeed!" began Mrs. Calvert, anxious to exculpate herself; but she was not allowed to advance further in her speech, for Arthur interrupted her.

"My mother is not to blame in the matter," he said, addressing Lady Lester. "I alone am responsible, and I am perfectly willing to accept the responsibility!"

"Your willingness or unwillingness is equally indifferent to me, sir!" responded Lady Lester, haughtily. "My object in coming here was to seek Miss Lester, and beyond that my only wish is to leave your house with as little delay as possible. Did you not hear what I said, Marcella? Put on your hat and cloak immediately!"

Still Marcella was silent, and made no effort to move from her place by Arthur's side. With a gesture of fond pride, he drew her arm through his.

"Marcella will not go with you, Lady Lester! I forbid it!"

Lady Lester put up her eye-glasses, and regarded him as one may regard some curiosity

of nature. Then she broke into a contemptuous laugh.

"You!" she repeated, with insolent emphasis. "May I inquire what right you have in the matter, and by what authority you speak?"

"My rights are unimpeachable, for they are those of one whose duty it is to protect Marcella—even from her mother. My authority is also beyond question, for it is that of a husband!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

In spite of intense physical fatigue, Lillith could not get any sleep in the humble lodging Stephen Brooks had provided for her, and she was up betimes, and ready dressed to start out as the clock struck eight.

Stephen, however, did not appear until nine, and then a cab was called, and he announced his intention of accompanying Lillith to Heathcliff, greatly to her satisfaction.

As ill-luck would have it, the cab got blocked on its way to Paddington, and they arrived at the station just two minutes after the train had gone.

There was not another one for two hours, consequently, they could not reach Heathcliff until two o'clock—a delay that seemed to Lillith interminable. However, the time somehow slipped away, and at last the eleven thirty train was ready to start.

Brooks got the tickets, and put Lillith into a first-class carriage. His behaviour, altogether, was as gentle and chivalrous as if he had been some "knight of high degree," instead of a hard-handed mechanic.

"I am going in the next compartment," he said, "and the guard has promised to look you in here, so you won't be disturbed until you get to your journey's end."

Lillith briefly thanked him, and was grateful for being left alone, especially as she knew Stephen would be close at hand in case she wanted him.

In effect, he got out at every station, and showed himself at the carriage door, in order to reassure her as to her security—for she could not get rid of a nervous terror of Sir Horace Dalton, who had proved himself so bold and unscrupulous in his villainy that his reappearance, even after the events of the previous night, would hardly have surprised her. Her terror was unfounded.

The Baronet, on his return to the Highgate house, had been so stricken with apprehension of the consequences that might follow his victim's escape, that he made all haste in getting over to France—carefully avoiding Dover on his way.

He was now convinced, not only that Lillith's old love was dead, but that he was actually an object of aversion to her; and although the grapes did not look less tempting because they were out of reach, he finally decided they were not for him, and prepared to console himself for their loss with all the philosophy of which he was master.

Lillith, however, did not know this, and was conscious of a distinct feeling of relief as the cab Stephen had hired at the station drew up in front of Heathcliff Hall, and the young engineer sprang from his seat on the box, and helped her to alight.

"Would you like me to stay, my lady, or not?" he asked, and she made an affirmative answer, and then entered the house, where she was met in the hall by Streeter.

"Oh, my lady, what a good thing you have come!" exclaimed the valet, who, of course, knew nothing of the supposed elopement. "Doctor Symes is here, and he has been asking for your address, so as to telegraph to you."

"Doctor Symes!" repeated Lillith, in consternation. "Why is he here?"

"Because my master's wound has begun to bleed again, and the doctor has been trying to stop the hemorrhage."

He got no farther than this, for Lillith grew

so deadly pale that the man was frightened; and Stephen Brooks, who had been standing behind her, and had heard what had passed, now came forward and supported her to the library, where he put her on the couch just as Lillith felt consciousness ebbing from her.

But she did not quite faint, although her eyes remained closed for a minute or two. When she opened them they fell upon a face that was strange to her, and yet seemed oddly familiar—the face of a middle-aged man with grey hair and sad blue eyes—eyes like Lillith's own.

"My dear," he said, bending down, and kissing her with a certain solemnity of gladness, "I am your father!" and then he put his arms round her and drew her to him; and Lillith, in the midst of all her troubles, felt that a new element had entered her life, for Lord Ansthorpe's carass was in itself an assurance of his love.

Even then her first thought was for her husband, and drawing back she uttered his name.

"He is ill—very ill, I fear," answered the Earl, gently; "but"—putting his hand on her arm as she sprang up, "it is no good attempting to see him, for Doctor Symes says the utmost quiet is essential, and he certainly will not let you enter the room for fear of agitating Mr. Lyndhurst."

"He is not—dying?" faltered Lillith, and her father shook his head.

"No, but a messenger has already been sent to telegraph for a London physician, and when he comes we shall know better what the patient's condition really is."

At this point Stephen Brooks stepped forward, his pale face working with emotion.

"Do you mean, sir—my lord, I should say—that Mr. Colin is likely to die through the pistol-shot wound?"

"I did not say that, but he is certainly very ill," answered the Earl, somewhat surprised at the manner of his interlocutor.

"And his illness is caused by his wound?"

"Yes—to the best of my belief."

"Then," said Stephen, deliberately, "I wish to give myself up for attempted murder. It was I fired that pistol-shot, and if Mr. Colin dies I deserve to be hanged!"

"My good man—are you mad?" exclaimed Lord Ansthorpe, while Streeter's eyes expressed the same query.

"No. I was mad once, I believe, but I am sane enough now, and it's right I should be punished for my rashness. You can come with me to the police-station if you like," he added to Streeter, "and if further evidence than my own is required, Lady Lillith herself will be able to give it."

As the door closed on the two men, Lord Ansthorpe turned to his daughter in bewilderment.

"Do you understand what this man means—or is there any truth in his statement?"

"What he says is quite true," she responded, gravely; "but I cannot enter into particulars just now, while there are even more important things to speak of. Tell me what caused my husband's relapse?"

The Earl hesitated for a moment, looked at her earnestly, then said, in a low, but perfectly distinct voice,—

"The belief that you had left him for Sir Horace Dalton."

"But how did he know that the telegram I received was not from my aunt?"

"Because Gertrude has been here this morning, and she declared she had not sent it, and had not seen you."

Lillith put her hands before her face in a very sickness of pain and humiliation. Colin believed her to be so false—so vile!

A great sob broke from her lips, and Lord Ansthorpe again kissed her brow.

"My daughter," he said, "I feel like a man groping in the dark with no clue to guide him. If you have indeed sinned, I cannot cast a stone at you, for possibly, if I had remained in England, and brought you up as it was my duty to have done, things might have been

very different indeed. But—"his voice changed—became instinct with passionate entreaty—"I cannot—will not believe you have forgotten your wife's duty; guilt does not look out of such eyes as yours!"

"Father!" she answered, very quietly, "your trust is justified. I am innocent; but I see how terribly circumstances are against me, and I cannot even blame my husband for condemning me. It was this, then, that caused the hemorrhage to set in?"

"Yes. Doctor Symes ascribes it entirely to mental excitement."

And then Lillith gave her father a full account of her connection with Sir Horace Dalton; beginning with her engagement to him, and ending with the events of the preceding evening. This, of course, included the reason that had induced her to become Lyndhurst's wife—which she told with shame, indeed, but with perfect candour, and with no attempt to slur over her own fault in accepting him.

That same evening the London physician came, and looked very grave as he saw Lyndhurst—who had been lying in a semi-comatose state for the last five hours. He knew nothing of his wife's arrival, for Doctor Symes would not risk agitating him by mentioning her name; and, as a matter of fact, he was so faint through loss of blood as to be unconscious of what was going on about him, and, therefore, incapable of receiving any communication.

Nothing could be done for him, save the preservation of quiet and good nursing. How Lillith longed to undertake the task!—but this both the doctors absolutely forbade, and so she had to wait with what patience she might the issue of an illness, that even sanguine little Doctor Symes did not conceal from her would probably be fatal.

Her father stayed with her during the first twenty-four hours, and from him she learned the history of her parents' wedded life, and the secret of the cottage at Bournestown, which sheltered her mother.

The mystery was all explained now—Lyndhurst's clandestine visits there, the label on his bag, his hurried journey, and his sketches which she had seen at the cottage. She remembered, too, how the tall, slim woman, with fair hair, had watched her window in Grosvenor-square before her marriage, and how the same woman had been present at the wedding. Why had no instinct told her, then, that it was her mother, and thus have spared her so much misery?

On the second day the Earl went away to Bournestown, to seek a reconciliation with the wife from whom he had been so long parted; while Lillith stayed behind, spending most of her time in the little dressing-room adjoining the sick chamber, so as to be as near the invalid as possible.

On the following afternoon Lord Ansthorpe returned, bringing with him a delicate, fair-faced, fragile looking woman, who clasped Lillith to her breast in a very ecstasy of love, and seemed as if she would never let her go.

"Mother! mother!" the young wife cried, after the first transports were over. "Why did you not seek me out and tell me who you were? If all the rest of the world had scorned you in their miserable misjudgment, I would have trusted you!"

"My darling, it was for your sake I kept away," answered Lady Ansthorpe—and what reply could have been so fraught with maternal love?—"I saw you beautiful, admired, and—as I hoped—happy. To take up the unhappy past could only have brought shadows on your sunlight; and so, at first, I secluded myself with an occasional sight of you, and later on, when I got to know your husband, I heard of you through him. Even that satisfied me, although I must confess, that when you and your cousin came to the Rosary I was sorely tempted to throw aside all concealment, and boldly avow my identity, just for the sake of holding you in my arms once again. But I conquered the impulse, and looked myself in

my room until you had gone. Ah, Lillith! how kind and good your husband has been to me! He is, indeed, a king amongst men!"

Lillith did not reply, but, in good truth, her heart echoed her mother's eulogy. The knowledge of his worth had come too late, now that he lay dying, and beyond the reach of her love.

Lord and Lady Ansthorpe had not travelled to Heathcliffe alone. In the cab still waiting at the Hall door sat a little, thickly-veiled figure, wearing a large, black cloak; and after an interval of half-an-hour, Lady Ansthorpe came out, gave the driver directions, and then seated herself beside the veiled figure.

"I am going to redeem my promise, Letty," she said, gently. "I shall see you to your father's house before I leave you."

For her companion was none other than Letty Redmayne, whom she had saved from a suicide's death.

It was Lady Ansthorpe who, having come up to London to consult a physician with regard to her own health, had gone into a chemist's shop near Waterloo Station while waiting for her train back to Bournestown, and had there seen Letty. Something in the girl's manner as she bought the laudanum had made her suspect her purpose, and, haunted by vague misgivings, she had followed her.

She was not in time to prevent Letty from swallowing the poison, but she at once took her to a doctor, who, by means of emetics, prevented the drug from taking effect. And then Lady Ansthorpe's kindness would not let her desert the girl whom Providence had thrown in her way, so she took her back to the Rosary with her; and Letty, after a few days sullen, miserable silence, at length confessed who she was; and, at the earnest entreaty of her protectress, consented to go back home and seek her father's forgiveness.

When Lord Ansthorpe appeared, and, having been reconciled to his wife, prepared to take her to Heathcliffe, so that she might see her daughter without delay, it was decided that Letty should go with them; and in all the stress of her own affairs, Lady Ansthorpe found time to think of her *protégée*, and even tore herself away from Lillith (to whom she explained her reasons for going), in order to make poor Letty's penance as easy as she could.

The wintry sunset was lighting up the Woodlows—splashing its windows with crimson—when the cab drew up in front of the rustic porch.

Trembling in every limb, Letty got out, followed by Lady Ansthorpe, and went softly through the parlour into the kitchen beyond.

It was dusk here, but the firelight leapt and blazed, casting ruddy shadows on the white-washed wall and the oak rafters of the roof. The farmer was sitting in his arm-chair in front of the fire, his head sunk on his breast, his dog at his feet.

"Father!"

He raised his head, looked round eagerly, anxiously, peering into the dusk with his failing eyes, and at length seeing the quivering little figure close to the door.

"Did not get up—paralysis chained him to his chair, alas! but he stretched forth his arms, and the light of a joy, almost divine in its intensity, radiated from his worn, old face."

"Letty! my daughter! my dear one!"

He wanted no professions of penitence, no excuses for the past, no promises for the future. His love for her was too full and absorbing not to be sufficient for itself; his compassion was well-nigh as great as that of Him who has promised to take the straying lamb in His arms, and gather His children together, "as a hen gathers her chickens under her wing!"

Lady Ansthorpe watched the scene in silence for a moment—the sobbing girl caressed into calmness by the tender, if homely accents of the rugged old farmer. Then she turned quietly away and left them together.

CHAPTER XXXII.

OVER Heathcliffe Hall hung the shadow of a great fear, for its master lay hovering between life and death, and in the struggle it was hard to say which of the two contending forces would gain the victory.

Weakness was the only name the doctors could give to Lyndhurst's malady. He was, of course, greatly debilitated by loss of blood, but his wound was healing, and he had no specific disease, besides which his constitution was thoroughly sound and healthy, so that there seemed no legitimate reason why he should not recover.

By this time, memory and consciousness had both returned, but he seemed to exercise neither to any great extent. All day long he lay in a state of semi-lethargy, answering in monosyllables whenever he was addressed, and rarely volunteering a remark of his own free will.

Of Lillith's presence in the house he was kept in ignorance, neither was Lord Ansthorpe allowed to approach him, for fear of the evil effects that even so much excitement might produce. The physician from London came down occasionally, but he said candidly he could do no more than leave the case in Doctor Symes' hands—no medicine could affect it—and so the Heathcliffe doctor was left in sole charge.

"There is something in the case beyond my skill," he said, one morning, to Lord Ansthorpe. "Mr. Lyndhurst is behaving now just as he did before his relapse; he refuses to take more nourishment than is actually needed to keep body and soul together, and seems quite incapable of making the least exertion on his own behalf. I do not conceal from you that if he persists in this course of conduct he must die!"

The Earl looked, as he felt, greatly shocked, and the doctor, glancing at him curiously, continued,—

"I really think the time has come when some effort should be made to arouse Mr. Lyndhurst from his apathy. Surely an appeal to his affections would have the desired result!"

"But who is to make the appeal?"

"There is only one person," answered the doctor, shortly, "and that is his wife."

"But I thought you expressly forbade her approaching him. I thought you feared the excitement her presence might produce?"

"So I did at first. Now, however, excitement is what is needed—some kind of stimulus to induce him to shake off this deadly numbness."

Lord Ansthorpe reflected on the advice, which his own observation induced him to believe was sensible. His opinion, however, was that the sudden sight of Lillith would prove too great a shock to the sick man, so he determined himself to approach him first, and pave the way for Lillith later on.

This he did that same afternoon, Lillith remaining in the dressing-room, where she was a listener to all that passed.

Colin seemed surprised to see Lord Ansthorpe. He opened his eyes, and held out his hand languidly.

"I thought you had gone?" he said, with a faint smile. "Have you been here all the time I have been ill?"

"All but one day."

"And Lady Ansthorpe?"

"She is here too!"

The young man's eyes expressed a question which delicacy would not let him put into words, and which the Earl hastened to answer. "Yes!" he said, with some emotion. "We are reconciled—thank Heaven!"

Lyndhurst's eyes again closed, and for some seconds he lay quite motionless. The Earl, thinking this a good opportunity, repeated to him the gist of what Doctor Symes had said, telling him, in effect, that the issue of his illness lay in his own hands.

"If that is the case I am quite willing to die!" Colin said, calmly. "I have no desire to live!"

"But that is absurd!" exclaimed the Earl. "You are young—your life is valuable—"

"To whom?" interrupted the sick man, bitterly. "On the contrary, my death would be a release to myself, and a benefit to—" he hesitated, a faint flush rising to his cheeks; then added, almost in a whisper, "to Lilith."

"To Lilith!" repeated the Earl, not catching his meaning.

"Yes; for if I died, there would be no bar to her marriage with the man she cares for. She would be saved the miserable publicity of a divorce."

The Earl was well-nigh speechless with surprise.

"Is it possible that you—thinking Lilith has brought shame and disgrace upon you—care whether she is spared the merited penance of such a crime? It seems to me that if I were in your place I should have no room for thoughts of mercy."

"I don't know!" Colin answered, a little wearily. "Perhaps, if I were strong and well, I should have different ideas, and should hunger to revenge myself on that villain!" He would not say the Baronet's name. "As it is, my only hope is that she may escape the consequences of her folly. Perhaps the mists of death are already closing about me, and I see things through their haze," he added, with a sad smile that suddenly left his face as the sound of a woman's anguished sob broke on his ear. "What was that?" he asked, sharply.

"Your nurse, perhaps," answered the Earl, evasively. "Suppose," he went on, with slow distinctness, "I were to tell you that Lilith had come back; that her going away was the result of a ruse on the part of Sir Horace Dalton—that she is innocent of wrong in thought, word, and deed. What should you say?"

Colin half-raised himself in bed, and grasped the Earl's arm.

"Is this true—is she here?"

The next moment Lilith knelt beside his bed, her hands clasping his, her tears falling like rain from the heavy blue eyes, his name on her lips. Lyndhurst's breath came in heavy gasps, and Lord Ansthorpe, in alarm at his deadly pallor, went into the dressing-room to get some restorative.

"Lilith!" Colin said hoarsely, "look at me—tell me you are innocent!"

"I am innocent, I am innocent!" she cried, and she kissed his hands with passionate fervour. "Whatever my faults against you—and they are many—I have brought no disgrace on your name! Oh, Colin—Colin—forgive me—live to pardon me—live to love me!"

He started, and looked at her as if the words had hardly reached his senses. Then a low cry broke from his lips.

"Love you! Have I not loved you—loved you through all these weary days—longed to hold you in my arms, until the longing has grown a fever. And to what good?"

"This, my husband"—the proud head bent low, the sweet, red lips again were laid on his thin hand—"that your love has been a revelation to me of all that is best and noblest in manhood—of all that is sweetest and happiest in life. I love you, Colin, so well, that existence without you will be one constant pain. Oh, my husband! my husband!" her arms were wreathed around his neck, her voice trembled with passionate entreaty. "You have taught me a lesson of noble self-renunciation, of kindness, and unselfishness, and forbearance, that has shown me the frivolity and meanness of my old life before I married you—the smallness of my aims, the egotism of my pride! Live to help me in my future life—to show me what heroism really is, and to make me strive to emulate it!"

"Too late, Lilith—too late! Death is so very near, life has almost slipped from my grasp!"

Nevertheless, his eyes dwelt on her with an infinite sadness, and, weak as he was, her touch thrilled every nerve in his body, as it used to do of old.

A passionate protest broke from his wife—

her arms held him close—closer, until his head lay on her shoulder.

"You shall not die!" she wailed. "I hold you—I will keep you from Death himself! Oh, my dearest, my dearest—surely Heaven will not take you away just as the shadows have passed by, and its own sunshine is ready to fall on our path! Such cruelty cannot be!"

"Kiss me," he said, feebly, and she obeyed—not once, but over and over again—such kisses as he had dreamed of in the old days, but had never hoped she would give him. And now the coveted good came too late!

"At least I shall die with the assurance that you love me," he said, and then he fell back from her encircling arms—lifeless!

Yes, lifeless. But there are two sorts of lifelessness. There is that whose end is the grave, and there is another which only lasts for a time, and from which the patient wakes to a consciousness of his surroundings, and it was the latter which held Lyndhurst for awhile in its grasp.

Restoratives were administered, and after a time he recovered—weak and suffering from the effects of the scene he had gone through, but the vitality of hope sending the blood through his veins, and giving him the desire of life.

Happiness is a wonderful medicine—its effects are more powerful than the most health-giving drug in all the pharmacopoeia, and three or four days were quite sufficient to produce a very marked change in Colin. During this time Lilith never left him; night and day she was by his side, and as she moved about the room to get him medicines, or reach some cooling essence to put on his forehead, his eyes watched her with a never-ending delight—a delight that he himself could hardly realize.

In the interval she had told him everything, and he had believed her implicitly. When she came to the surrendering of Stephen Brooks for firing the pistol-shot, Lyndhurst had at once sent off a messenger desiring that the young engineer should be liberated, as he declined to prosecute, and under these circumstances Stephen was immediately set free.

Directly after leaving the police-station he went to the Woodloes, being of course, unaware of Letty's return, and anxious to set the old farmer's mind at rest concerning himself. As he neared the house an indefinable change in its appearance struck him; the windows looked brighter, the curtains were all clean, and the creosote at the porch, which the autumn winds had blown down, was nailed neatly up against the woodwork. Stephen did not notice these things in detail, but their general effect was not lost upon him, and it set him wondering.

It was late in the afternoon, but the door stood open, and he advanced through the parlour to the entrance of the kitchen. There he came to a pause and looked in. The old farmer sat in his arm-chair at the fireside, and close up to him was pushed the little round oak table on which the tea tray was set, with its accompaniment of home-made bread, golden butter, and a savoury dish of broiled ham. In front of the tray sat Letty—a sober, rather pale-faced Letty, looking somewhat older, and a great deal staidier than of yore, but otherwise unchanged. She was simply dressed in a black serge dress, with a white linen collar, and it gave her rather the look of a nun, or a sister of mercy.

In an instant Stephen comprehended the situation, and he stepped inside, and held out his hand, while Letty rose from her chair, a good deal flattered by his presence, but reassured by the quiet, matter-of-fact tone of his greeting.

"You have come back, Letty?"

"Yes, Stephen, I have come back!"

All this happened two years ago, and if you chance to visit Heathcliffe Hall now you will see a sturdy little twelve months' old heir

beginning to toddle about, and making the passage ring with his shouts of laughter, and baby prattling. He has his mother's deep-blue eyes and golden hair; but Lilith says, with delight, that otherwise he is the image of his father—and, in her estimation, this is the highest praise it is possible to bestow, for Lyndhurst is her ideal of all that is good and noble and lovable, and she cannot wish a better fate for her son than that he should resemble her lover-husband!

"They twain" are, indeed, one flesh—one in heart, one in their efforts to do good, one in their perfect love for each other. They rarely speak of the past, for its bitterness is fully redeemed in the happiness of the present; but, perhaps, it is all the better that both should have passed through the "cleansing fires" for they have purged away many of the faults to which humanity is prone; and certainly Lilith is a better and happier woman than she could ever have been if the oracible of sorrow had not refined the dross of her nature, leaving the purity of its gold without alloy!

Look at her as she stands on the lawn at Heathcliffe in the June sunshine—a lovely, smiling creature, leaning on her husband's arm, while her baby son makes his first attempt to walk alone—she is, indeed, a perfect type of sweet and gracious motherhood, and the sunshine falls lovingly about her as though to lend her a halo of its radiance!

Marcella Calvert and her husband often come to the Hall—a very different Marcella from the timid, frightened creature of old. Arthur is getting on very well in his profession, and he and his wife are a very happy couple, in spite of the fact that Lady Lester has emphatically declared she has washed her hands of them for ever!

Lady Lester is as juvenile as ever, and as much a woman of the world. She goes to two or three balls a night, and is proverbial for her light-hearted gaiety; but there are times when she misses the love and companionship from which, by her conduct, she has wilfully shut herself out; and the prospects of old age, uncheered by the affection of husband or children, is a dismal one, from which she draws back with disgust.

Sir Horace Dalton is still in Vienna—and there, it is to be hoped, he will remain!

As for Letty—if deep repentance can ever atone, then her sin is surely forgiven! She took up her old life at the farm, and fulfilled her former duties with a humility that touched her father to the heart; to him she was even tenderer and more thoughtful than ever, and once more she became what the old man fondly called "the very apple of his eye!"

After her return, Stephen went back to Glasgow, but not before she had told him how Colin Lyndhurst, having seen Sir Horace Dalton with her in the wood, had stayed to warn her against him, and had even gone to the Woodloes with the same kindly intention. Unfortunately, she had believed too implicitly in her lover to heed the warning, and so had rushed on to her fate.

At the time, Lyndhurst had been prevented, by the fact of his wife's former relations with the Baronet, from declaring his suspicions; for, as the reader knows, he was then under the impression that Lilith loved Dalton, and he feared that if he accused him of trifling with Letty Redmayne, his accusation would have been put down to jealousy.

It is true, that the day after he first heard of Letty's elopement, he had gone to Woodloes, and told the farmer to whom his suspicions pointed, but Redmayne had fancied him mistaken, and had afterwards attributed the communication to a desire on Lyndhurst's part to shift suspicion from his own shoulders.

Twelve months after Letty's return Stephen came to spend Christmas at the farm, and then he asked Letty to be his wife.

Poor Letty's lips trembled as she gave her answer, but she was firm.

"No, Stephen. You are getting on well at the works, are you? some day you will be a rich

man. There are many girls who would be pleased to have you—girls who have no wicked past to look back upon."

"The past is blotted out, Letty, and as for other girls—well, what you say may be true, but that doesn't alter the fact that I don't care for anyone but you."

"You will learn to care some day, Stephen. Think how hard it would be for you, later on, to have your wife's sin thrown in your face!"

"It would go harder with the man that threw it in my face!" answered Stephen, grimly.

"No, Letty, it's not my nature to change—if I love once I love for ever, and if I don't marry you I shall be a bachelor all my life. There's only one thing that would keep me back from making you my wife."

"What's that?"

"The fear that you might still care for that man!"

Letty lifted her eyes and looked at him undimly.

"You may dismiss the fear then, once and for ever. He is nothing to me, except a horrible memory."

"Then you will marry me?"

Still Letty shook her head; but Stephen pleaded so earnestly, that at last she gave in so far as to say that if, next Christmas, he was still of the same mind, she might—well, she did not know what she might say!

But Stephen knew, and the reader can guess; so it was arranged they should be married in the spring, and when the violets were hiding in the hedges and the last snow-wreath had become a thing of the past, Letty and Stephen plighted their troth!

[THE END.]

THE MYSTERIES OF FERNLEA.

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CHAPTER II.

JAMES GRAY awoke the next morning with the strangest feeling of discomfort. It was not many minutes before he recalled the scene of the night before in all its details; and the more he pondered over the strange interview at which he had involuntarily assisted, the more convinced he felt that Lady Julia Davenport shared some mysterious secret with the woman Janet, which they desired to keep from the whole world, more specially from himself.

It was in vain the solicitor strove to think himself mistaken. It was not flattering to feel he was considered an idiot, even by a waiting-maid; but then, on the other hand, it was ridiculous to try to apply the words to anyone else. What other lawyer had been invited to Fernlea for a week? No, it must mean him, but what the secret was, poor Mr. Gray felt at a loss to guess.

Suddenly, as he was dressing, a brilliant idea seized him. The beautiful heiress had fallen in love, and, perhaps, betrothed herself secretly without counting the cost of such an act. The mother dreaded its being found out, knowing it would cost Miss Joan her inheritance. Of course, that was it. Well, as far as he was concerned, they had nothing to fear. He wished Miss Joan to be mistress of Fernlea; he did not care about prolonging his trusteeship for another one-and-twenty years. Lady Julia might make her mind easy. He would ask no awkward questions, make no inquisitive researches. As a man, he admired Miss Davenport; as her trustee he wished her well, and unless the fact of an engagement was actually brought before him, he would take no notice. So Lady Julia and Nurse Janet might make themselves perfectly happy about the matter.

He went downstairs to find that breakfast would not be served for another hour, so he strolled into the grounds which looked so beautiful and picturesque this summer morn-

ing. The sight of a white dress in the distance guided him to seek companionship, and under a spreading chestnut-tree he came upon the younger Miss Davenport, a book lying unheeded at her feet, and her beautiful eyes very far away.

"May I invade your solitude, Miss Natalie? What a lovely morning it is!"

"There is nothing so beautiful as England," replied Nita, making room for him with ready grace. "Jack and I used to long to come home every summer."

"You mean England by home, of course? You could not remember Fernlea?"

"Not properly; but Jack is so fond of talking about it I seemed to. Do you know my brother, Mr. Gray?"

"I have not that pleasure. Is he at Fernlea now?"

"Oh! no; he is abroad," and she sighed. "I think he can't afford to come home. Jack is always in debt; but, oh! he is so nice."

"You are very fond of him?"

"Of course I am. He has always been the best of elder brothers to me. Jack and I seem to belong to each other, while mamma is wrapped up in Joan."

"Your sister is very lovely!"

"Isn't she. Mother thinks she will marry a duke. We used to go about a great deal abroad, and Joan had admirers wherever we went."

"And you?"

The girl blushed ingenuously.

"I only left the convent a month ago, and except for the holidays, I had been there ten years. I am quite a little nobody, mother says, and I shall never have any friends."

"I am sure that is not true. Everyone at Fernlea will want you for a friend; you are so like your grandmother, the late Mrs. Davenport."

Nita smiled.

"I am glad I am like someone. Joan is like papa. Mother says she is his living image."

"She is. You are both regular Daventrys."

Nita half sighed.

"It is so beautiful here. When I go back to the convent I shall just shut my eyes and fancy I see it all again."

"But you can't go back," protested James Gray. "You must be grown up. Lady Julia can't keep you at school all your life."

"I shall be nineteen this autumn. Mother means me to be a nun!"

The lawyer started.

"Impossible! You are not a Roman Catholic?"

"She thinks I should become one soon. She says I am not fitted for the world; she is too poor to give me a dowry, and the convent would take me for nothing because of my voice."

"And are you willing?"

"I don't know," said Nita, slowly. "I used to think I should like the life, it seemed so calm and peaceful; but now I have been to England, and seen how other girls live, I think I would rather not be a nun."

"You never shall be one with my consent," cried the lawyer, who was a rigid Protestant. "I call it unkind of your mother even to think of it."

Nita smiled half sadly.

"Mother has Joan, you see."

"But Joan is not her own child?"

"She is an heiress and a beauty. Everyone is fascinated by Joan. She has troops of friends."

"Lady Julia can't shut you up in a convent against your will!" returned Mr. Gray. "You have only to be firm in refusing; the idea is preposterous!"

"I don't know!" said Nita, slowly. "It always makes Jack angry when it is spoken of. He told me once he would never let mother do it. You see!" and the girl smiled half sadly. "Jack and I always cling to each other. We are the two unlucky ones!"

"I hope you will try to feel you have one friend at least in England!" said the lawyer, kindly. "I have known your family for

years, and we would do a great deal to serve the Squire's granddaughter."

"But that is Joan!"

"And you also. Surely, Miss Natalie, you don't forget that you are a Davenport? The accident of birth may make your sister an heiress, but in birth and station you are her equal."

Nita shook her head.

"When I was a child I used to pray for rosy cheeks and black eyes like Joan. I thought people must love me then!"

The lawyer stroked the soft hair with no unkindly hand as he replied,—

"I am glad we have had this talk together, my dear. I shall only be here a week, but if ever you need a friend just write to me in Garden Court, and I'll come down at once. You won't forget?"

"No. I shall not forget! How very kind you are to me, Mr. Gray!"

They went into breakfast, but his ward's beauty and Lady Julia's gracious hospitality did not impress the guest so strongly as they had done the night before. His eyes were opened. He could see the difference between Joan's dainty Parisian cambric, trimmed with real lace, and Nita's plain, white pique.

He could notice how the one girl was exalted at the expense of the other, and being a very tender-hearted man in private life it made him fairly indignant.

He had an audience with the heiress in the library after breakfast. He explained to Joan all that would be hers in a few months' time, taking care to say a rash engagement would forfeit all. Then he mentioned the sum coming to her stepmother, and suggested some provision for Natalie.

Miss Davenport shook her head.

"I am glad there is something coming to mother. She needs it so much, for Jack costs her a great deal; but I see no necessity to provide for Natalie."

"You are children of one father!" said the lawyer, bluntly. "Is it fitting that you should have fifty thousand a-year, while she is penniless?"

"That is my grandfather's doing. He chose to leave Nita unprovided for. It would show great disrespect to his memory if I ventured to interfere with his arrangements. Besides, Nita's future is settled!"

"You expect your mother to portion her?"

"Certainly not! The child was a great favourite in the French convent where she was educated. The Mother Superior said a few months' study would convert her into a good Romanist. There they will gladly admit her as a sister without dot, because music is the strong point of the convent, and Nita's voice is marvellous!"

"Do you really mean to tell me, Miss Davenport, your mother agrees to this scheme?"

"It was her own idea!"

"And how if Miss Natalie refuse?"

"I don't think she will!"

He persisted.

"But if she does?"

"Then I suppose mamma must convince her how unfit she is for any other life. No one would marry a penniless girl, and we can't have her on our hands for ever!"

Mr. Gray bowed.

"Your prudence does you credit, Miss Davenport. I don't think we need fear your imperilling your fortune by listening to Sir Murray's suit prematurely. I never met a young lady so thoroughly able to take care of her own interests!"

Miss Davenport smiled.

"Well, confess it will save you a great deal of trouble!" And, without waiting for his answer, she walked through the French windows out into the grounds.

But here her mood changed. Once out of sight the colour deepened in her cheeks—a kind of feverish anxiety sparkled in her eye. The self-possessed, dignified young heiress had departed, and left a girl, whose very soul seemed

in a tumult of hope and fear. She drew out her watch, and glanced eagerly at the hour.

"Half-past eleven. I had no idea it was so late. He will be tired of waiting for me!"

On and on she sped until the grounds were left behind, and she had turned into the hedges of a wood which skirted her home on one side. She hurried on until, in the thickest part, she saw what she sought. A man rose hastily from one of the tall trunks, and came towards her, a smile on his face, a sparkle in his eyes.

"Norman!"

"Joan."

And no one who heard the voice in which he spoke or saw the blushes on her cheek could have doubted the fact that these two were lovers.

"I thought you were never coming!" he said, presently, with a tone of fond reproach.

"I could not help it, Norman, I was kept. Oh, Norman!" she cried, pitifully, "when will all these shams and deceptions be over? Why can't we meet as other lovers do? Why must we plot and plan just to secure half-an-hour together? It is so hard!"

He looked at her fondly, a world of love shining in his clear, grey eyes.

"The shams could be over now, the plotting could this very day, Joan," he cried, earnestly, "if only you would consent. My darling!" and his voice grew eager, "won't you give up your ambitious dreams, and trust my love to provide for your future?"

Her hands were clasped in his, his eyes were fixed on her face, as though to read her inmost thoughts. The face was beautiful, but there was no sign of yielding in its expression.

"Norman," she cried, passionately, "I cannot do it. I love you—you know I love you! but not even for your sake can I face poverty!"

"And you call that love?"

"It is not for myself only," argued Joan. "It is not as though I risked losing happiness for ambition. Next January I shall be free, free to make my own choice. Surely, Norman, if you love me, you can trust me for six brief months?"

A strangely troubled look crossed his handsome face. It was not the first time by many that a fear smote him Joan's ideas of right was widely different from his own.

"It would not be such dire poverty, Joan, my darling! I have three hundred a year of my own, which I could settle on you, and my writing brings me in a nice little income. Indeed—indeed, sweetheart, hardships need never touch you!"

Joan shook her head.

"It is you that are selfish, Norman, you who are unreasonable! You say you love me?"

"Better than life!" he interrupted.

"Then why can't you trust me for six months?"

"I would trust you willingly, but—"

"But what?"

His voice grew low and serious.

"Joan, you know that we love each other, that before Heaven we are betrothed?"

"What of that?"

"Can any good attend us," he asked, hurriedly, "if to obtain your inheritance we act a lie? Joan, if you win Fernlea and its revenues by representing yourself free and unshackled, can any blessing come on our marriage?"

"You are too fastidious."

"My darling, it is only I cannot bear that a shadow of sin should touch you—for my sake!"

"You have your remedy," said Joan, stiffly. "Go—forget me! Let me blot this episode out of my life, and assure my prudent guardian next January that I am free."

"And you tell me to do this?"

"If nothing else will silence your scruples I tell you to do this. Norman, I cannot give up Fernlea. I cannot remember the time when I did not look forward to reigning here. Besides, there is my mother. If I forfeit my inheri-

tance, she loses the portion she has been expecting these eighteen years! Instead of receiving ninety thousand pounds on my birthday, and having a daughter able to supply her with every luxury, she will have to pinch and scrape all her days on a beggarly five hundred a year!"

"I own the thought of Lady Julia weighs with me. It does seem hard on her; yet—"

"And yet you would rather reduce her to poverty than have a little ordinary patience!"

"Joan, you cannot understand."

Her whole face softened as she looked at him.

"Make me understand, Norman. Tell me all that is in your heart."

"I have the thought of all this prudence!" he cried, passionately. "I hate the idea of my wife owing home and fortune to anyone but me; and ten times more do I detest the thought that I may really benefit from this subterfuge. I'll keep silent until your birthday, Joan, and then become your witor, the whole world will brand me as a fortune-hunter!"

"They cannot."

"They may."

The girl smiled tenderly.

"No one would have such a thought in connection with you, Norman. Anyone who looked at you must know you are like Douglas in the dear old Scottish ballad—tender and true!"

"And you will not let me speak?"

"For my mother's sake I cannot."

"Does she suspect?"

"Not the least in the world. Mother thinks I have no heart at all."

"And is she right, Joan?"

Joan smiled.

"I think so, for I am quite sure whatever heart I had is yours. Norman, why do people fall in love? I never meant to care for anyone. Jack has told me a hundred times I have no feeling, that I am eaten up with ambition. And yet—"

"And yet you have given your love to a penniless lad with a long pedigree. I can't explain it to you, Joan; but I am glad you have. Mr. Howard was mistaken for once."

"He and I never get on."

"You are no relation legally to each other, and yet you are forced into seeming brother and sister. I can understand the position is a difficult one."

"And mother frets so over Jack's failures. She is so fond of him, hide it as she may."

"I have often wondered she did not try to make you fond of him," said Mr. Anstruther, slowly.

"I!"

"My dear girl, Jack Howard has no fortune, no profession. Lady Julia openly declares his one chance is to marry an heiress. I have often wondered she did not try to secure you."

Joan shook her head.

"You wrong mother by such a thought. Once, years ago, when I first heard the nature of my grandfather's will, mother said she believed one of its motives was a fear she might encourage a match between me and Jack. I never saw her so agitated, Norman, in my life. She declared the Squire had done her a cruel wrong by the thought, for that she would as soon see me married to another; if there was no other wife in the world for Jack, no other husband for me, she should still oppose such an idea."

"She does not approve of me," said Anstruther, ruefully. "What are her views for you, Joan? I suppose you have heard them?"

"They point to Sir Murray Macgregor. He has received a general invitation to Fernlea, and a strong hint he is not to speak to me on any serious subject until next January."

"And you?"

She laughed.

"Norman, I do believe you are jealous?"

"I am," he admitted. "Joan, I think I am jealous of every creature who sees you. When I found my old friend Ronald York at Fernlea, I actually almost quarrelled with him, thinking he was drawn here by you."

Miss Daventry laughed.

"Which was very hard on him, seeing he never looks at any woman if he can help it, and has a special antipathy for me."

"Are you ever serious, Joan?"

"Very often. Oh! Norman," and the heiress sighed, "you can't think how tired and weary of it all. Couldn't they give me a sleeping draught to make me unconscious till next January?"

"I'm afraid not, Joan."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"I am staying at the Daventry Arms, the quiet just suits my writing. We will meet as often as you can manage it; only, Joan, I wish, from my very heart, there was no management required."

She smiled.

"You are too scrupulous, Norman. You should take comfort from the thought the prohibition extends to all. No one can speak to me on 'forbidden subjects' till January."

"But they can hang about you," declared Anstruther, disconsolately, "and put as much sentiment as possible into their eyes. I declare, sometimes I feel ready to throttle Macgregor."

"Please don't!—he's very harmless."

"And you've some old party staying in the house?"

"The family lawyer. He's nearly sixty, and has a great want of taste; he can't bear me."

"Why not?"

"Because, unlike the profession generally, he believes in sentiment, and I have not got enough to please him. It was he who made me late this morning. He would keep me to explain all about my property."

"The property to which you are willing to sacrifice your love—eh! Joan?"

"Not sacrifice, only postpone," she corrected.

"I have a great mind to come up to the house and call on Lady Julia. You know she gave me a general invitation—before she suspected my wishes respecting her daughter."

"Before she thought of anything but gratitude to you for saving that daughter's life."

"Well, don't be surprised, Joan, if you see me."

"You had better not come."

"Then don't let York bring me any very startling account of your flirtation with Macgregor, or I may find myself bound to come and assert my rights."

They parted. Their eyes met, not once or twice. The man's honest voice invoked a blessing on Joan's head. Then he turned towards the pathway leading through the wood to Fernlea village, and Joan sped away back to the hall.

But the interview had not been unperceived. A pair of eyes had seen Miss Daventry in close conversation with a gentleman. No words had been overheard; but Nurse Janet had seen enough to make her anxious.

She went home by a nearer way than the young heiress, and contrived to be busy in Joan's room at some dainty needlework when her young lady returned.

"You looked tired, Miss Joan!"

"Yes," and Joan threw herself into a chair.

"I have been walking fast, and the sun is terribly hot to-day. I feel quite knocked up!"

"It's your mamma would feel knocked up if she knew where you had been this day!" said the woman respectfully, and yet with a touch of authority in her manner. "Oh, Miss Joan! Surely you're not planning to break Lady Julia's heart, and make her little better than a pauper all her days!"

Joan started up indignantly, her cheeks crimson with displeasure.

"You forget yourself!" she said, sharply. "How dare you speak to me like that?"

But Janet was no whit subdued.

"Would you rather I went to my lady?" she asked, quietly. "Shall I tell her that the heiress of the Daventrys creeps out by stealth to hold secret meetings with her lover like a kitchen wench?"

"Silence!" said Joan, angrily. "Leave the room!"

"Not so fast!" replied the woman, still keeping her quiet, self-command. "I've served your mother, Miss Joan, for eighteen years. I was here in the days of the old Squire, and I won't see Fernlea lost to his grandchild by her own folly! Do you know if anyone carried the tale of this morning's work to lawyer Gray it would go far to lose you your inheritance?"

"You can tell him if you like."

"I am no tale-bearer!" retorted Janet; "but, Miss Joan, you shall not drag your mother into poverty if I can help it! Either you give me your word to hold no more speech with her, or I will tell him all I know of your interviews as you have held today, or straight to my lady!"

"Do you imagine my mother would lock me up in my own room like a spoiled child, or feed me on bread and water?"

Janet's quiet face was ablaze with wrath. "I'm not given to imaginings, Miss Joan," she said, gravely. "I've known Lady Julia this many a year, and I know she's not one to have her will not asid. If there's no other way of keeping you out of harm's way I shall take you back to France, and leave you in the convent, where she wants to keep your sister, rather than your folly should ruin all her plans."

Joan had shuddered. That Lady Julia was very determined, and stuck at little, she knew. Hitherto she had been all tenderness, all indulgence to the young heiress, but Joan felt in her heart Janet was right. Lady Julia would not care what rigid means she used so that she—as she would phrase it—saved Joan from her folly.

For a few minutes there was silence. The two looked at each other. The girl, in the pride of her youth and beauty, dressed daintily, as became an heiress, in French cambric and lace, the woman, whose youth was past, whose charms—if she had ever had any—were forgotten, who had been a servant all her life, and wore the plain garb common to her class, a neat white cap surmounting her scanty hair. These two stood and looked at each other as though measuring their strength.

"This is nonsense!" said Joan, at last, trying to speak flippantly, and not show how she was impressed. "Supposing you carried your tales to Lady Julia, do you imagine she would believe you?"

"Yes."

"Against me?"

"Yes. She is clever, and would remember I had no interest to deceive her, while you had many."

"I have a great mind to tell you to do your worst!"

"I will give you five minutes to think of it, Miss Joan," said the maid, sitting carefully away, as though the young lady's decision had nothing to do with her. "If I once go to Lady Julia your days at Fernlea are numbered."

"I don't believe mamma would listen to you!"

"She would if I told her I should take the story to your guardians!"

"What do you want me to do?"

Very—very sullen was the tone.

"Promise never to be seen *tête-à-tête* with a strange gentleman in a lonely spot again—and keep your word!"

"You are making a terrible fuss, but I suppose you must have your own way. Well, then, I promise; and now, perhaps, you'll leave me alone. I assure you, I consider your behaviour unwarranted impertinence!"

The woman said nothing, she retreated at once; but when she had closed the door, a look of hatred came over her pale features, and with her teeth clenched together, her eyes fixed on Joan's door, she mused.

"Impertinence! The busy will have to learn to keep a civil tongue in her head, or maybe it'll be the worse for her! Impertinence, indeed! Ah, young lady, you little know!"

Joan meanwhile threw herself on the bed, and tried to think. For four years she had

known the exact terms of her grandfather's will, and had been assured by her mother she must never listen to any lover until after her twenty-first birthday. But, then, Norman Anstruther hardly reckoned as an ordinary lover! He had saved Joan's life, plunging into a lake to save her, when a rash straining to reach some water-lilies growing near the bank had precipitated her into the water. But for Mr. Anstruther Lady Julia knew her child must have been drowned, and gratitude forced her to receive him at her house.

For some weeks she never thought of the danger that might ensue. When she awoke to the fact that he was young and handsome, that his eyes had a knack of wandering to Joan's face, she determined that the intimacy

was perilous, and must be broken off.

She said not a word of her plans, only hurried her preparations to leave for England, and finally took advantage of Mr. Anstruther's absence in Paris to start suddenly for Fernlea.

She said not a word of her reasons to Joan, being unwilling to suggest the idea of her being in love with Norman.

She simply brought her to England, surrounded her with fresh faces, and dimly hinted that though no love-making could be allowed for six months, there would be no harm in permitting the friendly attentions of Sir Murray Macgregor.

Alas for Lady Julia! She honestly believed Joan to be heart-whole. She had educated her for the world, encouraged her ambition, and studiously left love and sentiment out of her vocabulary. How was she to guess that Mr. Anstruther followed quickly on her footsteps, and at the time of Mr. Gray's visit had had half-a-dozen private interviews with the heiress?

Many a mother would have been thankful to give her child to a man of Anstruther's noble mind and honourable character, but Lady Julia's idol was gold. She could not bear the thought of losing the ninety thousand pounds looked forward to through all these years, and lose it she must if Joan turned restive, and chose love before wealth.

Joan Daventry, tossing uneasily on her bed, began to see her grandfather's will as she had never thought to do.

She loved Mr. Anstruther passionately. Even though she had refused to make herself poor for his sake, she yet knew her life would be blighted if she lost him. She wanted to keep both wealth and happiness, and she found the task a hard one.

Enter Lady Julia.

"My dear child, is anything the matter?"

"Yes," and Joan started up, determined, at least, to take vengeance on something. "Mother, I have been terribly annoyed. I have been positively insulted! I had meant to speak to the housekeeper, but perhaps it is better to bring my request to you; you will know how to send the creature away quickly, and without any fuss."

"My dear Joan, has one of the servants vexed you? You need have no scruples; the whole household are newcomers, and can be changed without any reason except that they do not suit us. Is it Pauline? Nita says she is deceitful, but I never saw anyone dress half so well."

"It's not Pauline; she suits me admirably."

"But, my dear, I can't think how you have come sufficiently in contact with any of the others to take a dislike to them. Which is it?"

"Janet!"

Her eyes were fixed on the ground, or she must have seen the change in her mother's face. It grew first red, then pale; the eyes had a troubled, scared look. Joan saw nothing of this, but she did marvel the reply was so long in coming.

"Well, mamma," she cried, impatiently, "of course you will send her away? She has been horribly impertinent and familiar, and I can't bear the sight of her!"

Lady Julia recovered herself by an effort.

"My dear, I will arrange for Pauline to attend on you entirely. I own Janet is not a very experienced firewoman for a young lady!"

"And you will send her away?"

"I cannot!"

"Mamma!"

"Listen!" cried Lady Julia, speaking with far more eagerness than the case seemed to need. "Janet Dent has lived in our family all her life. She gave up home and country to follow my fortunes on your grandfather's death. She nursed both you and Nita through a dangerous illness, when I thought I should have lost you both. I am bound to her by a hundred ties of gratitude and association. I cannot dismiss her as you propose; every one would say she came on me."

"I thought you never cared what people said?" objected Joan, petulantly.

"My dear, I think you will admit I don't often refuse requests of yours; but this one I must!"

"You might give her an annuity."

"You might give her a year's salary for your fortune; besides, I am sure she would refuse it. She is not an old woman, and an idle life in a little cottage would be intolerable to her."

"But as soon as I am of age I shall get rid of her; so she can't stay here more than six months, and you might as well send her away now."

Lady Julia was firm. She shook her head.

"I cannot!"

"Why not?"

Once, twice the widow essayed to speak, but the words would not come. At last she said slowly,

"Joan, have you ever heard of the family feud?"

Joan opened her eyes.

"Of course," she said, coolly, "dozens of times; but what in the world has that to do with Janet? Guy Daventry can't gain anything unless I die before January, and I'm no more likely to die if you oblige me and send off Janet!"

Lady Julia laughed.

"I laughed at the family feud once, and scoffed at the idea of the curse coming true as much as you do. But I have a strange fear over me lately that trouble will come to me or mine through Guy Daventry. So far as I know, Janet is the only person who could identify either him or his mother, therefore I must keep in with her."

"Why, they lived in this village; heaps of people must remember them!"

"It is twenty years ago since they left Fernlea. I doubt anyone here being able to identify them; but Janet met them when we first went abroad. I can't tell you all the particulars, but there is no doubt she did meet them. She said Mrs. Daventry did not look a day older, and that the son was a fine young man. Until you come of age, Joan, and succeed undisputedly to Fernlea, I dare not quarrel with Janet Dent!"

It was the truth, and yet it was a lie. The poor conscience-stricken woman was right in saying she dared not quarrel with Janet Dent, but she was utterly false in her reasons. Her motives for keeping friends with her waiting-woman had nothing to do with Guy Daventry and his mother, though Janet Dent had indeed met them both abroad. Still part of her answer was true; and her earnestness impressed Joan strangely.

"I am very sorry," she said, slowly.

"Mother, are you quite sure?"

"My darling!" replied Lady Julia, "I am positive, and I will tell you something. If I only could have managed it I would have rid myself of Janet years before. She is a faithful servant, and most efficient work-woman; but she is too familiar, she has been with us too long; and if only I could have done it without hurting you, there is no time these twelve years I would not joyfully have sent her about her business."

Joan was amazed.

"And I thought you liked her!"



[THE INTERVIEW WAS NOT UNPERCEIVED. NURSE JANET SAW ENOUGH TO MAKE HER ANXIOUS.]

"I ought to," confessed Lady Julia. "Certainly, I owe your life and Nita's to her devotion; but there is something uncanny about the woman, and I have never taken to her."

"Mother, do you like Mr. Gray?"

"Yes; I think he is a most able lawyer."

"But do you like him, mother?"

"Very much; he is very agreeable, and consults me about all the details of your affairs just as though I were your mother."

Joan started.

"You are my mother," she said, fondly, "I have never known any but you, and I am quite sure you love me as though I were your own child."

"I do, indeed! You are so like your father. Ah, Joan, I hope your life will be happier than mine! The old Squire broke off my engagement to his son, and married him to an heiress. My relations obliged me to accept Mr. Howard, but I never loved him, nor he me. I have never been able to care for Jack just because he is his father's son. Then, when fate restored me to my life's love, your dead father, you know how soon he was taken from me!"

"Poor mother!"

Lady Julia wiped her eyes. She did not often enjoy the luxury of tears.

"You were given to me on the Squire's death. You have heard what a weak, wizened, little creature was the tiny heiress I took away from Fernlea. You know what a beautiful girl I brought home! In all these years, Joan, you have been more to me than Jack or Nita, just because in looking at you I see my dead lover's face!"

"And Nita is not like him."

"Not like him personally. She has the Daventry features. People say she chiefly resembles her grandmother, the very lady whose choice of a husband led to the far-famed family feud!"

"When is Jack coming home, mother?"

Lady Julia shook her head.

"Never while he has a five-pound note in his pocket. Jack cares for me as little as I do

for him. I don't believe he has a scrap of feeling for any human creature except Nita."

"And she can do anything with him!"

"You see she was left a good deal to him and the nurses while I was busy with you. I never remember the time when she was not Jack's charge, and I believe now we shall have a great piece of work with him before she is safely shut up in her convent!"

"I told Mr. Gray about that! He seemed to think it cruelty—declared we ought to portion Nita!"

"I should never do that; not if I had the wealth of the Indies. It would be wicked."

"Wicked!"

"It is very sad, darling; but you have no drop of my blood in your veins, and Jack takes after his father. My mother, Joan, whom I never knew, was in a lunatic asylum for years. The taint of insanity had been in her family for centuries. The affliction usually slips one generation, and passes to a patient's grandchildren. I feel sure the curse will one day fall on Nita, and not for worlds would I allow her to be married, and carry the dreadful heritage into another family!"

Joan started.

"Poor child; this is terrible!"

"She need never know of it!" pursued Lady Julia. "Such diseases remain dormant for years. If she has a quiet, secluded life the mischief may never develop itself, only she must have calm; so you see, Joan, why I face the risk of being thought a heartless mother, and mean to shut up my youngest child in a foreign convent!"

She left the room then, and went into the grounds away from Joan. Free from all observation her pent-up excitement found vent, and she broke into a fit of sobbing, as passionate and unrestrained as though she had been a headstrong child.

Sitting at the end of the long shrubbery, close to an old disused well, her grief found vent. Was it for the husband of her love?—was it for the difficulties in Joan's path, or for

the terrible doom that seemed certain to be the portion of her own child? Who can say? The Lady Julia wept till she had no more tears. Then, rising to return to the house, and looking through the spreading trees at Fernlea in its beauty, she muttered,—

"If only I were free! Ah, Heaven! If only I were free how fair this world would be to me!"

"It's fair enough now!" said a voice at her elbow, "if only you'd have common prudence. What do you expect to happen if you go making an exhibition of yourself like this?"

It was Janet Dent, the waiting-woman, the invaluable servant, who thus accosted her mistress. Lady Julia turned on her, her face fairly livid with rage.

"Go!" she cried, bitterly; "leave me! Am I never to be in peace?"

"I must speak to you. Where shall it be, and when? I tell you it is important, for your sake and hers!"

Lady Julia pressed one hand wearily to her head, as though to still its pain, and answered slowly, almost indifferently,—

"Here. To-night!"

(To be continued.)

There never yet was anything which could be proposed, from the most important to the most humble, but, if you were to ask other people about it, you would hear that it was "all very well, but really it is not the time." If the originators of all the great movements and improvements which have benefited the race had waited until their friends ceased to say "It is not the time," they would have all gone into the dust without doing those things which have made them immortal. If, for the execution of the humbler designs which rise in the course of our private affairs, we were each to wait till others said it was time, there never would be anything done beyond the limits of the most ordinary routine.



["YOU CAN'T GET OVER THAT, CAN YOU?" THE WOMAN SAID. "HE IS MY HUSBAND!"]

NOVELETTE.]

THE LOVE OF HER LIFE.

—O—

CHAPTER I.

PEOPLE said that Deepdale Manor looked its best in the spring-time, when the lilac and laburnums were in blossom, and the trees were newly-clothed in their fresh, green garments; but seeing it on this early September morning, in a flood of golden sunshine, with its reddened leaves, and the tawny glories of its Virginian creeper wreathing the porch, and the walnut trees just beginning to flame out into brilliant orange on the lawn, it was difficult to imagine a possibility of its being lovelier, even in that time when the youngest and fairest daughter of the season first wakes into life.

There was a hum of merry voices on the terrace, a flutter of white dresses and bright-coloured ribbons, and lace sunshades, and gay peals of laughter, which told that Squire Mannering's visitors were in the best possible spirits as they waited for the waggonettes to come up, and carry them off to the rendezvous where their picnic was to take place.

Both the old Squire and his wife were as full of mirth as their guests; and Ralph Mannering, their son, declared that notwithstanding their white hair, they were in reality the youngest of the party.

Althea Mannering, the only daughter of the house—a fresh-coloured, rather pretty girl of about twenty—was talking to a young officer named Averil, and the subject of their conversation was a tall, well-made man, with a bronzed complexion, tawny hair and moustache and dark eyes, who was leaning against the porch smoking a cigar, and listening to, rather than taking part in, the general conversation.

"How much better Max Vaughan looks since he has been down here!" observed Averil, lowering his voice, so as not to be

overheard. "He is an old friend of your brother's, is he not?"

"A very old friend, indeed. They were at Oxford together. Poor Max! His life has been rather a failure, considering the splendid promise of his college days."

"I don't know that he deserves your pity," Averil said, a little grimly. "I suppose it is his own fault that he betted and gambled, and generally made ducks and drakes of his money."

"Perhaps so; and yet I don't know! He is so good-natured that he is very easily led into mischief, and extravagant generosity is as natural to him as breathing."

"It is a pity his rich uncle does not take the same view of his nephew's dissipation," added her companion, drily. "I hear he has made a will, and cut him off with the proverbial shilling."

"I believe it is true," returned Althea, regretfully; "but I am not without hope that the old man will alter his will when he learns that Max has reformed—and he really has reformed lately, as you yourself have seen, for ever since he has been at the Manor he has never touched a card, and Ralph says he has given up horse racing as well, and is determined never to have anything to do with it again!"

"Good resolutions!" commented the soldier; "I expect they are due in a great measure to Mabel Brooke's influence."

Althea did not reply, and just then a young girl with a wonderfully delicate flower-like face, and a certain gentle serenity in her manner, came out of the hall door, and Mr. Vaughan immediately roused himself from his thoughtful attitude and greeted her with a pleased smile.

"You are wearing my flowers, Miss Brooke? That is good of you!"

"Is it?" she returned, with a faintly conscious blush, as she glanced down at the tuberoses in her dress. "I thought the goodness was on your side in getting them for me."

Isn't it lucky we have such a fine day for the picnic?"

"Very lucky. I am to drive the mare in the dog-cart because there won't be room for all of us in the waggonette. Will you give me the pleasure of your company?"

She hesitated a moment, then consented, and soon afterwards the vehicles came up, and they started away along the pretty country roads, between hedges where blackberries were ripening in the sunshine, and the scarlet-berried briony made vivid spots of colour against the changing foliage.

"Such a morning as this makes one absolutely in love with life!" exclaimed Mabel Brooke, after they had proceeded some distance without speaking. "One feels as if the mere sense of being were happiness enough! I love the autumn."

"Do you? For my own part I like spring better; but perhaps that is because my own spring time is past."

Mabel looked at him, and laughed.

"You speak as if you were an old man!"

"So I am—or getting on that way. If you doubt me, look at my grey hair."

He pulled off his cap, and swept his hand through the close-clustered curls, which were, indeed, very grey on the temples.

"Oh, but that does not matter a bit in a man," observed Mabel, consolingly. "Indeed, I think it is rather nice to be grey!"

"In that case I feel reconciled to my fate," said the young man, looking down at her with eyes that grew very tender as they rested on her fair young beauty—beauty that consisted less in regularity of feature, than in the thoughtful tranquillity of the large grey eyes and the purity and truth of their expression.

Anyone less like a fashionable nineteenth century young lady it would have been impossible to find, and this effect was doubtless due to the fact that her whole twenty years of existence had been spent in a quiet village, where the noise and bustle of the world only came in faint echoes through the medium of

the newspapers. Indeed, this visit to Deepdale might be considered as her introduction to society; and it must be confessed that she had found the change from her aunt's secluded home to the gaiety and brightness of Deepdale Manor a very pleasant one. She had been staying there for nearly a month now, and the last fortnight of that time had been spent a good deal in the companionship of Max Vaughan, who had come down with Ralph for the shooting, and evinced no desire to go away again.

"I am going to challenge Fate!" he said, presently, when they were nearing their destination—some old ruins, than which no spot could have been better adapted for a picnic. "For this one day at least, I too will be in love with life, and will be perfectly happy—forgetting both the past and the future, and living only in the present moment!"

It was a curious thing to say, and Mabel found herself wondering what he meant by it; but he did not explain, and he kept his word, for she had certainly never seen him in such good spirits before. He was the life and soul of the picnic party, made the best jokes, sang the best songs, and led the way in a bright abandon to the spirit of the moment, that made them all feel like children let out for a holiday.

Luncheon was spread under the shade of a slenderly pointed arch of the old abbey, now covered with ivy, and from this place a splendid view could be obtained of the surrounding country—fertile valleys with a river winding like a silver ribbon through their green fields, sunny uplands stretching away to the hazy blue hills, little hamlets lying peacefully in the embracing shade of the trees.

"Those old monks who built this abbey had a keen eye for the picturesque," observed Max after the repast was over, and the men had lighted their cigars; "I think it must have been rather jolly in the old days when directly one was tired of the world one might come to a charming place like this, and spend one's days in a pleasant sort of lotus eater's dream, as they doubtless did."

"What about the fasts and abstinence days?" asked Ralph Mannering, laughing. "They would not have been in your line, Vaughan!"

"And the sackcloth and ashes?" added Averil. "Besides, you know, one must have grown demented sick of doing the same things and seeing the same people day after day."

"It would all depend upon what sort of people they were, wouldn't it?" said Ralph; then he got up, and stretched his arms above his head, while his glance rested on Vaughan, who was by the side of Mabel, as usual. "What do you say to a turn round the ruins, Max?"

"I say I much prefer remaining where I am, thank you all the same," was the indolent rejoinder.

"Nonsense! We must get you out of your lazy ways. Besides, there is something I want to point out to you; so come along."

Max looked at him rather searchingly, and then, somewhat to Mabel's surprise, he got up, and the two young men strolled off together.

"What do you want with me?" asked Vaughan, when they were well out of earshot. "Of course I saw from your expression that it was not the ruins you were after. Is anything up?"

Ralph did not immediately reply, and when he did it was with another inquiry.

"We have been, and are still, very good friends, aren't we, Max?"

"Yes, and shall continue to be so for many years yet, I hope!" heartily. "But what makes you say that at the present moment?"

"Well, I am going to say something to you which you may possibly resent, or which, at all events, you may regard as an unwarrantable interference, so I want to make a sort of apology first. The fact is, Max," Ralph

hesitated, knocked the ash off the end of his cigar, and then threw the cigar itself away rather irritably, as if he did not at all like the task he had undertaken. "The fact is you are paying a great deal too much attention to Miss Brooke. She is very young, and very innocent, and Heaven knows what ideas you may have put into her head by your foolish words!"

Vaughan's face flushed a deep dark red beneath its tan, and he turned round quickly as if an angry rejoinder trembled on his lips. If this were the case, however, he controlled the impulse and remained silent.

"Of course," went on Ralph, who, having once begun, did not seem to find it so difficult to continue. "It is decidedly unpleasant for me to have to say this to you, but the girl is my father's guest, and it is my place to look after her, and see that she comes to no harm. She is a sweet little thing, as pure and unselfish as a freshly opened lily, and it is for this reason that I have risked speaking. If she were an ordinary fast, dirty, nineteenth century girl, quite capable of taking care of herself, I should have held my tongue—perhaps even if it had been Alice I might have done so, for she is quite of a different type to Mabel, and a coquette to her finger tips. I tried my best to prevent you driving her here this morning, but—"

"Good heavens, man!" burst forth Max, suddenly interrupting him. "One would think, to hear you talk, that my mere proximity would sully her, that I was a villain of the deepest dye, unfit to be trusted near an innocent girl!"

"Nonsense, Max—don't be a fool! I am quite sure that no word has ever passed your lips in speaking to her that all the world might not hear; but it is not there that the harm comes in. What if she were to grow to care for you? If she did, it would be no ephemeral fancy, but the one great love of a woman's life—at least, if I know anything of her nature, and I think I do. I put it to you, Max, is it fair to her?"

They had come to a sudden pause on the other side of the ruins, and now stood beside a slender shafted column, half-covered with ivy, and against this Max leaned, while his eyes were fixed on the ground in sombre meditation.

Mannering, seeing his agitation, put his hand kindly on his shoulder.

"There's no harm done as yet, old fellow, and if you will take my advice none need follow. You have only known each other a little over a fortnight, so that if things are put on a proper footing you will part as friends, and nothing more; only you must pursue a very different line of conduct to what you have done lately. There must be no *titte-à-tite* in the library, no moonlight stunteries on the terrace, no pretty speeches at afternoon tea. You must just pay her the ordinary attentions a man owes to a lady, and nothing more."

While he was speaking, Max had been holding a silent commune with his own heart, and then, for the first time, he felt the truth.

"You are too late, Ralph," he said, in a curiously quiet tone, while his face had grown grey; "the mischief is done—I love her!"

There was a moment's silence, during which the two men looked at each other steadily. Then Ralph spoke—sharply and abruptly.

"Does she know it?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then, Max, you must go away and leave her in ignorance. It sounds a strange thing for me to say to you, but there is no alternative. Remember that other—"

Vaughan turned round as if he had been shot.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Do not mention her! You are right, and I have been wrong. I will do as you say—I will leave to-morrow."

Meanwhile, the rest of the party—after the

usual fashion of pic-nickers—had strolled off in couples, and Mabel found herself left alone.

Looking round, she discovered several delicate little ferns growing out of the crevices of the wall near which she stood, and the idea struck her of uprooting some of them and carrying them back for Mrs. Mannering's rockery.

She lightly climbed the wall by means of the roughly-piled up stones, proceeding very carefully, however, because of its crumbling condition, and looking down, beheld Max Vaughan walking along, his eyes fixed on the ground in gloomy meditation.

She stood upright and called his name; and at the same time there was a crash of falling masonry, and just in front of her the wall yawned in a wide chasm, from which the stones and mortar were still falling.

So old and fragile was the wall that even the vibration of her light tread had been sufficient to give the finishing touch to the work of decay that had been going on for centuries; and now that part of it had gone there was every probability that in a minute or two the rest might follow.

Mabel was by no means a timid girl, but it would be useless to say she was not rather frightened as the cloud of dust from the fallen masonry rose up about her, and she fancied she felt the wall swaying beneath her feet.

The ferns fell from her nerveless fingers, and she cast an apprehensive glance round, not daring to stir, lest her moving might hasten the catastrophe she feared.

Max had looked up directly he heard his name, and a minute later, saw her danger.

Without a second's hesitation he decided on what was best to be done, and came and stood directly under her.

"Throw yourself down, I will catch you!" he shouted, holding out his arms as he spoke; and she obeyed immediately, with such a good result that he caught her in his arms, and put her to the ground uninjured.

But they were neither of them unmoved by the incident, whose ending might have been so very different but for his timely appearance, and Max was almost as white as Mabel, though he did not tremble as she did.

"Let us go away from here, it is dangerous to remain near that wall any longer, since it is sure to come down!" he said, and then he drew her arm through his—for she was almost incapable of supporting herself—and led her to another part of the ruins, where he put her to sit on a big stone, and afterwards knelt on the grass at her feet.

"Are you still frightened?" he asked, tenderly, for under the influence of her presence all Ralph's warnings and his own good resolutions were melting away.

"No, not frightened," she returned, with a little tremulous smile; "but it was rather an awful moment, and I can't get rid of the memory of it. If you had not come just then—" she finished her sentence with a shiver.

"Thank Heaven I did come just then!" he exclaimed, with fervour. "It was an awful moment for me as well as you; in fact, I don't think I have quite recovered from the fright myself. What made you go up there?"

She told him, and, after she had finished, put her hand in his, saying quite simply and naturally,—

"I have not thanked you yet for the service you have rendered me, but I do now with my whole heart!"

The touch of the delicate little fingers sent a thrill of exquisite delight through his veins; and, yielding to a sudden impulse, so strong to be overcome, he bent down, and pressed a kiss on the soft white hand.

Mabel started violently, and a swift flush of crimson spread itself over face and neck. There came into her eyes a half-startled expression, which he could not quite comprehend. His own eyes met hers, and her glance grew troubled, confused, finally fell. The hand which he still retained trembled, and at the sight of her agitation Max guessed the truth.

There was no one near them, and the silence and beauty of the calm autumn afternoon lay around them like a spell. Overhead a lark was soaring, his voice thrilling out in keenest, clearest joyance, and this was the only sound that broke the quiet.

It is easy to make good resolutions—easy to make promises even when the temptation is far away, but here it was close beside him—wooing him with its gentle beauty, and luring him on with the hope that happiness might still be his!

Max felt his blood coursing like a current of fire through his veins; his breath came quickly and sharply, and then the last barriers were burst, and he forgot everything but his love.

"Mabel—darling!" he whispered, "and as he spoke he held out his arms and drew her to his breast—she half resisting, half yielding to his caress.

"You do love me, sweetheart?"

"I do love you—with all my heart and soul!" she answered, shyly, but making the confession with the simple directness of her character, while a strange dream-like feeling took possession of her, as her head rested on his shoulder, and she felt his heart beating against her own.

As for Max, he was silent for a few moments from pure ecstasy that it would have been a desecration to put into words. A long vista of happiness stretched out before him, wherein all the sin and shame of the past should be redeemed. *The past!* He started violently as he thought of it, and all involuntarily his arms loosened their hold and fell at his side, while something like a groan escaped his lips.

Mabel looked up in quick surprise.

"What is it, Max?" she asked, his name coming quite familiarly to her tongue. Then, with tender anxiety, "Aren't you well?"

"Yes, well enough in health; but oh, Mabel! I fear I have done you a wrong by what I have just said. I have no right to tell you how dear you are to me."

"Why not?"

"Because a black gulf lies between us—the gulf of an irrevocable past."

Her face grew a little paler, but her eyes never lost their lustrous steadfastness of expression.

"Why should it come between us, Max? It is over and done with, and it is the future only with which we have to deal."

"Then would you marry me knowing there were pages in my life I could not unfold—knowing the sin and follies of my youth?"

"They are gone and repented of."

"Repented of, indeed and in truth!" he cried out, earnestly, "repented of from bottom of my soul! But does repentance mean atonement?"

"Yes—a thousand times, yes! If it were not so what hope would there be for sinners? Oh, Max!"

She came of her own free will and laid her pure young lips against his, while her white arms enlaced themselves round his bronzed throat. "Don't you understand that I love you for yourself—that your past is nothing to me, so that the future be different!"

"My love—my love!" he cried, and there was a dimness in his eyes that, if he had been a woman, would have exhaled into tears. And then they were both silent for a while, wrapped in the ecstasy of their love-dream.

Oh, the delight of that September afternoon, spent in loitering slowly through the woods, under trees whose leaves were already tinged with the scarlet glories of autumn! And then, later on, the drive home in the starlight, her head on his shoulder, her hand clasped in his—no witnesses but the stars of the passionate kisses he pressed on her lips! Could such joy last?

CHAPTER II.

Even since her childhood Mabel had lived at the Lindens with her maiden aunts; the

two Miss Brookes—for her father, who had been an officer in the army, died in India of fever when she was about three years old, and a few months after, on the voyage back to England, her mother had succumbed to grief and weakness, and thus the little girl was doubly orphaned.

But she had never known what it was to miss a parent's care, for both her aunts were devoted to her, looking upon her as the very apple of their eyes, and guarding her from harm, as one may guard a precious jewel.

It had been under compulsion, as it were, that they let her accept the Mannering's invitation to Deepdale Manor, and glad indeed were they to get her back again!

But the Mabel who came back was not the same Mabel who had left them—it was a Mabel with a new light in her eyes, a deeper flush on her cheeks, an added womanliness of aspect, and an engaged ring on her finger!

On the very evening of her return she told her aunts of her betrothal, speaking of it with a sweet, serious shyness that was infinitely charming.

They sighed as they heard, and looked at each other sadly. The news was not altogether unexpected, for they knew there was a shooting party at Deepdale, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world, that some one should fall in love with this "queen Rose in the rosebud garden of girls!" Nevertheless, it was far from pleasant to think they must ere long lose her.

"What is the young man's name, my dear?" asked Miss Euphemia, the younger of the two sisters—a charming little old lady, with the whitest of hair and the prettiest of delicate old faces—an old lady who looked like a piece of Dresden china, made a long time ago.

"His name is Max Vaughan."

"What—Max Vaughan, the nephew of old Sir Richard Vaughan, of King's Royal?" they both exclaimed in the same breath, uplifting their hands as they spoke.

Mabel looked rather startled, but nodded assent.

"I did not know his uncle was a baronet!" she added, thoughtfully.

"He is not. He was knighted by the Queen on some state occasion in which he took part, ten or twelve years ago," returned Miss Euphemia, rather breathlessly. Then she looked at her sister, and back at Mabel as if she hardly knew what to say.

"Do you know Sir Richard, Aunt Phemie?" asked the young girl with interest.

"We used to know him some years ago, and we hear of him occasionally through some friends who live near," was the answer, while the old lady still gazed helplessly at her sister, who seemed equally overcome with astonishment. Presently the latter spoke.

"Mabel, my dear," she said, gently, "you know that both Euphemia and I have no other wish than for your happiness, and that although we should miss you dreadfully, we should yet rejoice to see you married to a good man who would take care of you. My love"—this very pitifully—"from what we have heard of Mr. Vaughan we do not think he can be a very good man, and we should hesitate to trust your future in his hands."

"What have you heard of him?" asked Mabel, swiftly, and her slim, white hands were clasped tightly together in her lap.

"We have heard, in vague rumours, that he is wild and dissipated; and that it is for this reason that he and his uncle are not friends."

"I have heard it too," said Mabel, quietly, "and from his own lips; but the confession did not lessen my love—it increased it, if possible. He knows he has sinned, and he repents."

There was an ominous silence, and the young girl looked from one to the other with quivering lips. At Deepdale, when she had told Mrs. Mannering and Althea of the relations existing between herself and Max, they had neither of them uttered a word of con-

gratulation; indeed, both had looked dismayed, but here, at home, she had eagerly counted on meeting with sympathy.

After a minute's pause she slid down on her knees between the two old ladies, and put a hand in each of theirs.

"Will you be hard on Max, aunties—you, who are so pitiful and charitable to those who have sinned and atoned?" she cried, her voice thrilling with passion. "Do we not hear the doctrines of repentance preached every Sunday, and have we not heard a hundred times of how the angels rejoice over one sinner that repenteth? Besides," she clasped her hands across her breast, and a half-rapt expression came into her eyes, "it will be my task to help him to resist temptation in the future, and to aid him in the new life that he will lead. You will like him when you see him—I am sure you will, and you will believe, like I do, that his nature is still generous and noble!"

"You love him very much?" said Miss Euphemia, in a very low voice.

"I love him better than my own life!"

There was no mistaking the sincerity of the declaration, and her aunts knew her too well to believe that she would either change or forget.

"Let us adjourn the discussion for a few days," said the elder Miss Brooke, gently. "You have taken us by surprise, my dear, and we hardly know how to receive your news. By-and-by we will discuss it again."

And so the subject dropped, and was not alluded to until three mornings later, when there came to Miss Brooke a letter from no less a personage than Sir Richard Vaughan himself.

"I am writing to tell you how pleased I am at the prospect of your niece's marriage with Max," it said, "and perhaps it may be to your satisfaction if I add that I am sure he is deeply in love with her, and that such an alliance will be his moral salvation. Of course I do not pretend to deny that his youth has been stormy, but for all that his heart is in the right place, and his nature is still noble. He promises that he will work hard at the medical profession; but this I do not wish, as, if he settles down steadily, I shall be glad to have his assistance in the management of my estate; and, indeed, I have proposed to him that as soon as he is married he and his wife should come and live at King's Royal, and I will give him five hundred a year for acting as my agent. I will also undertake to pay all his debts—which, however, he assures me are not so numerous as report has whispered. Finally, let me again repeat my pleasure at the proposed alliance, and pray give every kind message to the bride-elect."

Miss Brooke read this letter to her sister after breakfast, and the two maiden ladies had a long and solemn talk together—not the first by a good many that they had had on this same subject.

The conclusion they came to was that, under the circumstances, it would be an impossibility to withhold their consent, for it was quite clear to both that the happiness of Mabel was entirely bound up in her lover.

Accordingly, they told the young girl that they would agree to her engagement; but on one condition—namely, that the marriage did not take place until the end of twelve months, by which time she would be twenty-one, and it is needless to say that in this condition Mabel joyously acquiesced.

Max, however, who came down the next day, was inclined to think it hard, and pleaded strongly for an earlier date to be fixed.

"I am so anxious to feel you are mine—my very own!" he exclaimed, as he walked from the station with her arm drawn through his; she had driven to meet him, but they had dismissed the carriage, both preferring to walk. "It seems to me that I can never be sure of you until we are married."

She smiled up at him reassuringly. "You may be quite sure," she said, with a certain soft insistence of tone that he had

learned to know and love, "for nothing in the world would make me false to you."

"Nothing, Mabel? Say that again!" He stopped in his eagerness, although they were walking along the high-road; only luckily there was no one near to see them. "Tell me that your love would defy anything—everything—that come what will you will be true to me! Promise it by all that you hold sacred."

"I promise," she repeated, steadily, though her cheeks grew a little pale at his passionate vehemences, and then he drew a long, quivering breath of deep relief.

"You cannot think what a weight you have removed from my mind, sweetheart," he said, looking down at the fair young face with a world of passionate tenderness in his eyes. "But, at the same time, twelve months is a long while to wait for you."

"Not quite so long as Jacob waited for Rachael!" she said, with a mischievous smile.

"Not quite, as you say. Still, I would wait twice seven years rather than not have you at all. Now, I must tell you all about my visit to King's Royal, where I found Uncle Richard in a most amiable mood. It seems he knew your aunts a long time ago, and was delighted at the idea of our marriage. He promised to pay all my debts."

"Have you many debts, then, Max?" asked Mabel, interposing, with a troubled face.

"Not very many, my darling—not half so many as my friends credit me with."

"Couldn't you pay them yourself out of your income?"

"I could not, and for this reason. The sole income remaining to me comes from a life-interest I have in some property, which I have not the power to sell. I'm afraid," he added, "if it had not been secured to me in this way it would have been spent long ago. I was a terrible spendthrift once, Mabel."

"But you are not now?"

"No; because I have some object in saving! Oh, my dear one, it was a miserable life I led before I met you—blank, worthless, devoid of ambition save to make time pass away as quickly as I could! I would fain have it stand still now!"

After all he made a favourable impression on the two old ladies, who had looked forward to his coming with untold dread, and had drawn mental pictures very unflattering to the original.

Certainly he was handsome, they said, and as certainly deeply in love with Mabel; but that was quite natural! His manners, too, were gentle and refined; and from the extreme dislike the dear old aunts felt into the extreme of admiration, and even grew at last to think he was actually worthy of their niece!

As for Max himself his love seemed to grow deeper and deeper every day, and the week he spent in the quiet old house that had sheltered Mabel's girlhood was one of perfect content.

Only too soon it came to an end, and Max had to go back to town to arrange his affairs, and settle with Sir Richard about taking up his abode at King's Royal; for, acting on Mabel's advice, he had determined to accept his uncle's offer, and become his agent instead of following his first idea, and making himself a doctor.

He will never forget that last afternoon spent at the Lindens as long as he lives. Perhaps it was natural that he should feel melancholy at the prospect of leaving, but it was something more than melancholy that kept him silent as he loitered about the shady lawn by Mabel's side, and finally halted beneath the shadow of a mulberry-tree, whose moss-grown trunk was supported by strong iron bands, which proved how ancient it must be.

From there a good view of the house was obtained; and the borders, filled with dahlias, and asters, and marigolds, still showed bright against the sombre colouring of the old grey wall. Close to Max's feet was a large clump of late-flowering mignonette, and its scent came up in strong odorous puffs to his

nostrils. Ever afterwards the perfume of mignonette brought back this scene complete in its every detail.

"It will not be for long," Mabel was saying, by way of consoling him. "You will be down here again in a month at most."

"Yes, I know; but—"

"Well?"

"I have a sort of presentiment that something may happen in the meantime."

"What can happen?" she said, laying her slim fingers lightly on his arm. "You are not afraid of me?"

No—a thousand times no!

"Or of yourself?"

He shook his head, and stooped down to lay his lips against the pretty, slender fingers.

"I am not afraid of myself either. I suppose I am afraid of—Fate!"

Mabel laughed, then her face grew grave.

"There are some things that cannot be controlled," she said softly, "and Death is one of them. If it should come to either of us—"

"Hush!" Max said, with a quick shudder of repulsion. "Do not talk of anything so dreadful. My fears don't take that shape either. We are both well and strong, and death, let us hope, is a long way off. I suppose I am very stupid for giving way to credulous fears, but I cannot help it. I love you so well that the love itself almost amounts to a fear. You will write to me every day?"

"Yes."

"And tell me all you do?"

"All I do, and all I think," Mabel said, with a bright smile; and at that moment Miss Euphemia came trotting down the neatly gravelled path, and stood shading her eyes with her hands, and looking like a Dresden china figure.

"Are you there, Mabel? The sun is so blinding, I cannot see. Tea is ready, and Mr. Vaughan's train goes in half-an-hour."

CHAPTER III.

After Max's departure the weather suddenly changed, the skies were grey and cloudy, rain fell in torrents, and the merciless north wind stripped the leaves from the trees, and left the last glories of the Virginian creeper lying in damp, dank masses on the terrace outside the house.

For nearly three weeks Mabel was kept a prisoner in the house, and the first day that it was at all fine she took advantage of it to go for a long walk along the country roads, which were muddy and dirty beyond description. How the landscape had changed since she saw it last! Then it had smiled under the blue skies of the Indian summer, and the tints of the leaves had been painted in Nature's most lovely colours.

Now it was dim, and rain-sodden, and dreary; the few yellow leaves that still clung to the branches looked ragged and dead; the brooks were swollen into muddy, leaden-hued torrents, and a heavy brooding hush, as of nature stagnant and desolate, lay like a weight on the air.

Young and happy as the young girl felt she was nevertheless not impervious to those outward influences, and turned back before she intended, thinking that the cosy drawing-room at the Lindens was decidedly preferable to the fresh air under these melancholy conditions.

On her way home a cab passed her, and as it went by she caught a transient glimpse of a woman's face at the window—a face such as was not often seen in that primitive little village, where pearl powder was not in request, and rouge a horror unknown.

The owner of the face looked at her with a quick, searching glance out of a pair of large, and still lustrous eyes; then the cab passed out of sight round a bend in the road, and

Mabel, quite unconsciously, breathed a sigh of relief.

Why were unhappiness and vice, and misery of all kinds permitted in the world? she wondered, and then sighed, because she felt so impotent and helpless to cope with the great problems of humanity, and it seemed almost selfish to be so thoroughly happy herself, while the cry of the eternal misery of the world was going up every day to the pitiless skies.

On her return it was certainly a surprise to see the cab standing at the gate of the Lindens, and when she entered the hall her Aunt Euphemia came forward on tip-toe to meet her.

"My dear!" in a mysterious whisper, "there is a person in the drawing-room asking to see you. I don't quite care for her looks. Would you like me to come in with you?"

Astonished, Mabel certainly was, but she declined her aunt's company, nevertheless, and went into the drawing-room, which, with its bright fire, its cabinets filled with priceless old china, its dwarf bookcases and great bowls of flowers, looked prettier and more home-like than ever contrasted with the outside gloom.

The "person," as Miss Euphemia vaguely termed her, was standing in front of the fire, contemplating herself in the overmantel, but at Mabel's entrance she turned quickly, and gave her a quick, sharp glance that took in every detail of her appearance with the minute accuracy of a photograph.

She was a woman of about thirty-four or five, and had once been remarkably handsome—indeed, traces of beauty still lingered in the finely-cut features, the full, brown eyes, and the quantity of light hair that "feathered" about her face.

She was dressed in a style that was emphatically "loud," and her general appearance might also have been summed up in that one word.

"You wished to speak to me?" Mabel said, as she closed the door, and it must be confessed there was a shadow of restraint in her voice, for she was decidedly not favourably impressed.

"You are Miss Brooke—Mabel Brooke?" asked the stranger, who seemed perfectly at ease.

"Yes!"

"And you are engaged to Mr. Max Vaughan?"

"Yes!"—again, but this time with an up-drawing of the slim white throat, that—to one who could interpret the movement—meant a great deal.

"You are wondering what business it is of mine," observed the woman, with a short laugh. "Well, it is business of mine, and it has brought me all the way from London to this outlandish village. It is true I might have written what I had to say, but I wished to see you."

"You wished to see me!" faltered the girl, falling back a pace, and putting her hand to her throat as if she felt a constriction there.

"I wanted to see you," repeated the woman, deliberately. "I wanted to see what you were like—whether you were young, and pretty, and attractive—whether, in a word, you were a worthy rival!"

"I, a rival!" exclaimed Mabel. "Please explain yourself, for I do not in the least understand you."

"You will presently; meanwhile ignorance is bliss," was the sneering reply. "I suppose you are very much in love with Max Vaughan, as he is with you?"

"My relations with Mr. Vaughan cannot possibly have anything to do with you," Mabel said, with a certain dignity. "If it was to discuss this question that you have sought me I fear you have had a lost journey. Will you permit me to send you in some tea, and to wish you good afternoon?"

"Not yet. I have not quite done with you. The object of my coming certainly has to do with Mr. Vaughan, and it is as certainly my business. You are a young and innocent girl,

and know nothing of the kind of man he is—"

"Stop!" Mabel cried, authoritatively. "I cannot, and will not listen to another word on this subject."

As she spoke she went to the door, but her companion crossed the room swiftly and laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"You must hear—it is to your own interest that you should hear. Do you know who I am?" Her eyes glittered with a prevision of triumph as she paused a moment, then added in low, but peculiarly distinct tones, "I am the woman Max Vaughan married eight years ago!"

For a few seconds Mabel was silent, the colour all fading from her face and leaving her as pale as marble. Her visitor seemed to think she was going to faint, and made a hasty movement as if to support her, but the young girl drew herself away as if contamination lurked in the touch of her hand.

"I do not believe you," she said, with emphasis. "I will not believe that Max Vaughan would deceive me. You want to extort money, or you are an enemy of his who wishes to ruin his happiness."

"You are right there—I am his enemy, but I am his wife, nevertheless. I was married to him in a London church by a Protestant clergyman, and those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder. That is what the Christian—which is *your*—religion says, does it not?"

If there was malice in her face there was something in her voice so positive, so very like veracity, that Mabel was staggered. She felt as if she were in a horrible dream—a dream that while it lasted was more painful than real.

"Look here!" said the woman, producing some papers from a little leather bag she carried in her hand. "Do you know his writing? Look at this, and see if you recognise it?"

She held a letter close to Mabel's eyes, and the girl, hardly knowing what she was doing, saw the heading of it, "My own dear wife," in Max's handwriting, also its ending (for it was but a short note of a few lines), "Your loving husband, Max."

She turned sick and giddy; the writing was, undoubtedly, that of her lover. Before she could say anything her guest produced another document, which was a certificate of marriage between Maximilian Vaughan, bachelor, and Emily Bolton, spinster, and waved it triumphantly before her.

"You can't get over that, can you?" she said, in a loud, strident voice, the control she had hitherto exercised over herself disappearing in her excitement. "He is my husband, sure enough, though he has deserted me these many years past, and would have disowned me too, if he could."

There was a couch near Mabel, and on this she sat down, with a strained look of misery on her face that might have touched any heart—save that of a jealous woman!

"It is a horrible mystery—I cannot comprehend it, but Max will be able to explain it," she said, clinging with desperate faith to her lover, in spite of the damning nature of the evidence against him.

The woman laughed aloud.

"Explain away a marriage certificate! He will be a clever man if he can manage it, and as for you—you must be a fool to think such a thing possible. But you are young—and a love-sick girl is capable of any madness. I dare say you wonder how I came to hear of your so-called engagement; and I am quite willing to gratify what I feel to be a natural curiosity. Well, then, I have a friend at King's Royal—one of the servants there, by the way—and he wrote me word that there was general rejoicing over the return of the prodigal son; in other words, that Mr. Max was a reformed character—had been forgiven, and been taken back into favour by his uncle, and was about to be married to a certain Miss Mabel Brooke. I wrote back immediately

for Miss Mabel Brooke's address, and—you see me here!"

Perhaps in all her life Mabel had never exercised such control over herself as she did at this moment. It seemed to her that if she could only give way to the essentially feminine desire for tears that made itself felt as a sort of necessity she would be able to face her troubles better afterwards. But pride came to her aid; and though, as she rose slowly from her seat and faced the woman who, it was clear, regarded her as a rival, she was still very pale, there was a certain calmness of resolution in her eyes, before which the other flinched.

"Whether your motive in coming here was good or ill I know not," she said quietly; "but your mission is now accomplished, and there is no more to be said. If you are Max Vaughan's lawful wife I have been woefully deceived, and my thanks will be due to you for undeceiving me; but if—and this seems to me infinitely more likely—you have told me falsehoods, then your own conscience must be your punishment. In any case, the rest lies between Mr. Vaughan and myself."

She rang the bell as she spoke, and it was immediately answered by a servant.

"Show this lady to the door," she said, in her usual tone, and she bowed courteously as she stepped on one side to let her visitor pass.

The woman hesitated, looked at her, hesitated again, and then went out without a word.

It had been a battle of wills between the two, and Mabel had won!

She did not look much like a victor, however, when she was alone, for no sooner had the door closed than she threw herself again on the couch, and, pressing her hand to her brow, tried to think calmly over what had just taken place.

That letter and the certificate, the evidence in favour of this woman's tale, and her marriage with Max, seemed overwhelming; and yet, so great was Mabel's trust in her lover, that even now she would not believe he had deceived her. It seemed to her that she would rather give her senses the credit of having played her false.

Nevertheless, the suspense was too great to be borne, and as the sound of the wheels of the cab became faint in the distance she rose, went to her desk and took out a telegraph form, on which she wrote a couple of lines.

"Please come to me first thing in the morning. I have something of importance to say to you."

This she despatched at once, and then waited, with what patience she might, for his arrival.

CHAPTER IV.

NEVER in her life before had Mabel realised the meaning of that sentence, "hope deferred maketh the heart sick."

She went to bed, but sleep's gentle poppies were not strewn on her pillow, and in the morning she arose, pale and unrefreshed, feeling as if lie were somehow awry—and this in spite of the trust she still felt in Max.

Her aunts looked at her with eyes of sorrowful wonder, and instinctively connected her appearance with her strange visitor of the day before; but they asked no questions, treating her reticence with the delicate consideration of perfect good breeding which fears to intrude an unwished-for sympathy.

Mabel was in the garden when Max arrived, standing close to the mulberry tree—now reft of its leaves. Nearly all the flowers were gone—beaten down by the rain, and the few that still struggled bravely on were soiled and ragged-looking—very different to what they had been a few short weeks ago, when he and she had stood there wishing each other farewell. Only the mignonette, rain-washed as it was, sent up a faint fragrance, suggestive even in its decay.

"The delicate odour of mignonette,
The ghost of a dead and gone bouquet,
Is all that tells of her story—"

Max came striding down the wet paths with quick, eager footsteps, and as he drew nearer Mabel saw that his face looked white and haggard in the morning light, and there was in his eyes that expression which tells of a sleepless night.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried, as he caught sight of her. "Ever since I had your telegram I have been fearing that you must be ill, and I dared not ask anyone. Mabel!" in a changed tone, as she gently withheld herself from his outstretched arms, "what is it? What has come between us?"

"Nothing, I hope—oh, nothing—nothing!" she cried, with a sort of supplication in her voice, "only before you kiss me I have a question to ask you."

"Yes," he said, vaguely, but the glad light had all faded from his eyes, and he waited with strained eagerness for her to speak.

"I do not doubt you; in spite of all I have heard I trust you still!" she exclaimed, hastening to justify herself against his own possible doubts. "Only an accusation has been made against you, and it is but right that you should meet it, seeing that a certain amount of proof has also been produced."

"Yes," he said again, still in the same dull mechanical tones. "What is the accusation?"

"I hardly like to repeat it to you, it sounds so monstrous—and recollect, Max, that I put no faith in it—I only want you to contradict it. I will trust your word before that of all the world! A woman came to me yesterday afternoon and told me that eight years ago you had married her. Her name was Emily Bolton, and she showed me a letter in writing that seemed to be yours, and also a marriage certificate!"

She stopped suddenly, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say her tongue was paralysed by the awful pallor and wild expression of his face.

He made a step backward, and his breath came in short, dry gasps, as if he were in actual pain.

"Max—Max!—what is it?" she exclaimed in an agony of apprehension, and she came close up to him and looked into his eyes. "Tell me this tale is false—that the woman was trying to deceive me—that—oh!" she cried out, with a sharp spasm of utter anguish. "Only speak to me! Why don't you contradict this accusation?"

"Because I can't, Mabel! I have done many bad things in my life, but I have never told a deliberate lie, and I will not do so now," he said, in a hoarse voice, as he caught her two hands and held them firmly in his own. "Don't condemn me yet—wait until you have heard what I have to tell you. Oh, my darling! don't look at me like that!"—for her eyes were dazed and unseeing—"I would rather you plunged a knife into me and killed me at once. Heaven knows how readily I would sacrifice my life to save you pain!"

"And yet you have brought this upon me," she said, in a voice that hardly rose above a whisper. "You have made me love you while you have already a wife!"

"No, no, Mabel! I am not so bad as that. She is no longer my wife. I married her it is true, but the law has given me back my liberty. I am a free man, for we are divorced. Come, let us sit down on this bench, and I will tell you the whole history—not a very edifying one, I admit," he said, with grim bitterness, "but it will at least tell you that if I have sinned I have also been sinned against."

Without a word she let him lead her to the rustic bench, and there they both sat down, heedless of the wet grass under their feet, or the damp boughs above their heads.

Mabel never lifted her eyes, she seemed dazed, stupefied—almost unconscious, but as a matter of fact her senses were in their keenest state of tension, and not a word that fell from her lover's lips escaped her.

"I know not how this woman found you," he began, "neither do I much care. I myself have only seen her once in seven years, so you will see that our married life was a short one. I need not enter into details of how I met her, but I was just twenty-one at the time, foolish and sentimental, and she was a very beautiful woman, six years older. It is sufficient to say that she entirely deceived me as to her real character, and it was only after our marriage that I discovered how thoroughly base and wicked she was. She had not a vestige of affection for me, never had, and her sole motive in marrying me was because she knew my uncle was rich, and supposed I should be his heir.

"Our marriage was, however, kept very quiet for fear of his anger, and it was not until six months after that I informed him of it. His reply was characteristic. As I had married without his consent I could not expect him to do anything for me—in point of fact, he washed his hands of me altogether, and even refused to continue the allowance he had formerly made me. Well, I told my wife this, and she was furious. Then the truth came out—she had married me simply because she had fancied me rich, and now she knew that I could no longer give her luxuries—for she had already helped me to spend my fortune and run me very considerably into debt—she left me to go to a lover who was better off.

"By this time my Fool's Paradise had faded away like a mirage in the desert, and I recognized my idiocy—my fancy for her had given place to actual hatred, and my feeling when she left me was one of sincere relief. Only Ralph Manering, of all my friends, knew of my marriage, and he at once advised me to apply for a divorce. I did so, and obtained it without any difficulty, for she did not attempt to defend the suit; and as it was too thoroughly uninteresting in its details to commend itself to reporters it never found its way into the newspapers, and thus it fell out that only Ralph and my uncle were aware of it. The latter, I need not say, was very much delighted when he heard I was free, and advised me very strongly to marry some nice girl and settle down.

"I refused. The fact was, my experience of this one woman had been so miserable that I classed them all in the same category—I fancied there was not one worthy of a man's love; and so, in a spirit of utter recklessness, I plunged into all sorts of dissipation. I played cards, drank, betted, and cared not how many debts I contracted, or what people said of me. One thing," he interpolated with a short laugh, "they certainly said nothing in my favour, and as certainly laid to my charge a good many things I knew not. Black I may have been, but I was never so black as I was painted. Well, time went on; an old aunt of my mother's left me her fortune, and then my divorced wife came back to me—came back with tears of repentance, fell at my feet, embraced my knees, implored my forgiveness, told me she loved me yet!

"Needless to say that I received her protestations with scorn, and when she went away it was with a threat of vengeance—a threat at which I laughed then, little thinking she would ever have the chance of fulfilling it. I have told you before in what reckless pleasures I spent that second fortune—all indeed except my annuity, which I could not spend, and now I come to the date of my visit to Deepdale. 'Mabel,' his voice grew deep with intensity of feeling, "that visit and my acquaintance with you marked a new epoch in my life. For the first time I became aware how pure, and sweet, and true a woman may be. You were to me a revelation of womanhood in its highest and noblest form, and I felt that my love for you was capable of effecting an entire change in my life.

"Ralph Manering once took me to task for the attentions I paid you, and spoke in such a manner as to make me conscious of my un-

worthiness to approach you; and acting under his advice, I determined to leave Deepdale, and never see you more; for his words convinced me that it would not be fair to you to try and make you love me. Then came the revelation that you did love me, and with it the knowledge that by that love my own unworthiness was redeemed.

"After that I could not give you up; it required an effort stronger than it was in my power to make; and, besides, I vowed to devote the whole of my future life to the task of rendering myself more worthy of you, and I knew—I felt—that I could make you happy. I dared not tell you of that early marriage of mine, for I felt instinctively that it would be a barrier between us. I suppose I was wrong—I know I was wrong; but surely, Mabel, you will forgive me? Dearest! you will not let the past come between us?"

She had listened in complete silence to his story, never even lifting her eyes until its conclusion. Her hand still lay in his, but it was cold and heavy, as if it had belonged to a corpse; and as he put his last question he felt a shiver run through her frame. She tried to speak, but her lips were parched and dry, and no words came through.

"If you like, we will live abroad after we are married," he said eagerly. "And you need never be afraid of seeing that terrible woman again. I will—"

"After we are married!" she echoed, with a strange, dreary smile. "Oh, Max! don't you see that this alters everything? and that we never can be married? Never, never!"

"Mabel! you are not in earnest? Why should we not be married? What is to prevent it?"

"The fact that you have a wife already!"

"It is not true—she is not my wife!" he cried, violently. "She is no more to me than the vilest stranger I may meet in the streets. She shall not come between us—I tell you she shall not!"

As he spoke he seized the young girl in his arms, and strained her to him with a vehement passion that almost frightened her. It was as if he challenged Fate itself to separate them.

With some difficulty she drew herself away, but the effort was visible in her blanched lips and trembling hands.

"Oh, Mabel, darling! don't desert me!" he cried, in overwhelming terror. "What shall I have to live for if you send me away?"

"Honour!" she whispered. "And that is better than love, Max!" She put her two hands on his shoulders, and looked steadily into his miserable eyes. "That woman," she shivered as she spoke the two words, "quoted a sentence to me—'Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder!' It was a true one, and not all the Law Courts in the world should set aside the vows spoken at the altar of God!"

"But think what she was!" he urged. "I dare not tell you half her villainy. Surely her own conduct has broken the bond between us?"

"Yes, in a sense it may have done so; but none the less is she your wife—the woman whom you took for better or worse, until death should part you. Don't you see, dear," she spoke with infinite gentleness, "that if I married you now I should be doing both you and myself and her a great wrong—I should be outraging my own ideas of what is right!"

"You would condemn me to a living death, for the sake of your scruples, I see that," he said, very bitterly. "I tell you my one chance of salvation lies in you, and if you throw me over I care not what becomes of me. I shall go headlong to the devil!"

"No, you will live a nobler life than one of mere sensual self-indulgence," she said, firmly. "If you love me as you say you do, then for my sake you will overcome the evil promptings of your baser nature. You will pass through the 'cleansing fires' of tribulation, to emerge a stronger and better man!"

He shook his head. At the present moment

he could think of but one thing—that without her the future would be a mere blank, for in her all his hopes, his joys, his ambitions had become centred.

"You cannot love me," he said, roughly. "If you did, you would not send me from you."

And then her self-control nearly gave way, and a little cry of utter anguish fell from her white lips.

"I do love you!" she cried, vehemently—passionately. "It seems to me that I love you better than my own soul; but for your sake as well as my own—I cannot marry you. If I did I should lose my self-respect and yours as well. Don't make my task harder for me than it is already, Max; go away, and let me try to reconcile myself to the future, and get over this as best I can."

"You mean me to say good-bye to you—good-bye for ever?" he said in a harsh voice, totally unlike his usual tones.

"Yes; what else is possible?"

There was a few minutes' silence. Mabel remained with her hands clasped before her, and her eyes fixed on the ground. Max, on the contrary, looked around him, and was dimly conscious of the autumnal desolation of the scene on which he looked. The grey skies, the dripping trees, the yellow leaves, and sodden lawns—all spoke of the dead summer, and his own dead hopes.

"And we might have been so happy!" he groaned, with unconcealed misery.

Mabel put her hand to her throat—a not infrequent gesture of hers when she was agitated.

"We may be happy yet—there is a happiness in a sense of duty achieved," she said, with a brave striving after composure; but even to herself the sentence sounded trite and dry, and he received it with a gesture of scorn.

"Duty is a poor substitute for love!" he said. Then he added, in a different tone,—"Will nothing make you reconsider your decision, Mabel?"

"Nothing."

"You condemn me to a life of utter misery!"

"No,"—softly—"but I try to make you do right."

"You are cruel—heartless. You have no pity!"

She did not reply, save by a deep sigh. It was hard to be thus accused when every fibre of her being, every pulse of her heart beat for the man before her, urging her to throw every consideration to the winds, and live only for him and love.

But if she had yielded she would have been untrue to herself, and this she knew.

"Well," Max said at last, in the same dull, mechanical tones, "if you are obdurate, I suppose there is nothing for me to do but go. Good-bye."

He held out his hand, but she, with a sudden, unexpected movement, threw herself on his breast, faced her arms round his neck, and yielded herself utterly to his caresses.

"Good-bye, my own love. Be true to me still!" she said, and then she tore herself away and ran indoors, leaving him standing there, looking after her until she had disappeared within the house.

"Perhaps she is right. I don't know," he muttered, vaguely, as with slow, stumbling steps he made his way out of the garden.

"Anyhow, she is the one woman in the world for me!"

CHAPTER V.

When the two Misses Brooke returned from their drive they were informed that Miss Mabel was not very well, and was lying down. She had a headache, and asked not to be disturbed, adding that she could not eat any luncheon, so it would be useless sending any up to her.

"Has Mr. Vaughan arrived?" asked Miss

Euphemis, of the trim servant who gave the message.

"Yes, ma'am. He have been and gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes, ma'am. He had a talk with Miss Mabel in the garden for about an hour, and then she came in, and he walked straight out of the house and up the road towards the station, without so much as speaking a word to anybody, or leaving a message or anything of the sort."

The two old ladies looked rather disconcerted, and when they were alone the younger nodded sagely, observing—

"I am afraid there is something the matter between those two. Perhaps the engagement is broken off even!"

Mabel did not come down at all that day, and only Heaven and her own heart knew how terrible a battle she fought, and how many times she was nearly conquered.

The next morning she quietly announced that she was no longer engaged to Max, and after breakfast told in a few words the reason of their parting. So much she thought was due to her aunts; but she exacted from them a promise—very readily given—to keep it a secret from the rest of the world.

After she had gone out the two old ladies held an eager confab together, and the results of their opinion was communicated to Mabel that same evening.

"We have been thinking, my dear," said Miss Euphemis, who was, as usual, spoken-woman, "we have been thinking that as your life has been hitherto so quiet and monotonous we had perhaps better let you have a change of scene, and a chance of seeing the world. Did you not say that the Mannerings had asked you to go abroad with them this winter?"

"Yes," Mabel returned, listlessly, "but I refused."

"There is no reason why you should not withdraw your refusal. Your aunt Judith and I are too old to care for travelling about, but you are young, and it will do you good. It is the desire of both of us that you should accept Mrs. Mannering's invitation, and accompany her on her tour—that is, of course, subject to your liking to do so."

Mabel considered for a few moments, and finally came to the conclusion that it would be really the best thing she could do.

She had looked forward to the winter with dread unspeakable. To the long, dreary days, when she would have nothing to do but think of the happiness she had missed, and wonder how she would live out the rest of her life in the house where she and her lover had spent so many happy hours, and where, at times, she was reminded of him. Worse than this would be the nights when sleep refused to visit her pillow, and the memory of her lost love would haunt her like a living presence.

In travelling she would at least have change and variety, and the companionship of lively people—people, too, before whom it would be of necessity that she should hide her grief.

So it was decided, and a fortnight later she went up to town, and joined the Mannerings at the Charing Cross Hotel, where they were staying for a day or two before starting for Brussels.

Althea greeted her with affectionate warmth, but started slightly at her changed appearance.

"How white you look!" she exclaimed, as they met. "Have you been ill?"

"I have not been very well," Mabel answered, evasively. "I daresay I shall be all right soon."

Then Althea, who looked flushed and brilliant, told her secret, as she called it, which was, that she was engaged to Captain Averil.

"And, oh Mabel!" she exclaimed, enthusiastically, "I am so happy for her! So nice, and so deeply in love with me!"

Mabel congratulated her heartily, but not without a slight spasm, which seemed quite natural, as she contrasted her friend's happy prospects with her own blighted love.

But selfishness was a fault of which no one could accuse Mabel, and after the first sharp twinge she was able to give Althea her fullest sympathy, and the latter confided to her all that had happened since they met.

"I have but one trouble," she concluded, sighing, as she twisted the hoop of pearls that bore witness to her betrothal round her finger. "Arthur is frightfully jealous, and seems to fear I shall flirt with other men while he is away. Of course," added Althea, in a deeply injured tone, "it is very abominable, because I never flirt. It is true I sometimes talk and laugh with Ralph's friends, but that is quite different to flirting."

"You must try and make Captain Averil distinguish the difference," returned Mabel, smiling.

A day or two later they crossed to Calais, and went straight on to Brussels, where they intended staying for a month or two.

Mabel enjoyed seeing the pretty little clean capital, and she and Althea went about a good deal, and saw all there was to be seen before going on to Dresden; but if she had had any idea that change and excitement would drive Max from her mind, she very soon found out her mistake, for at the end of a month—at the end of six months, indeed—her remembrance of him was as keen as ever, and she constantly found her thoughts straying towards him, even when she tried her utmost to control them.

And so the winter passed away; and in April, when the buds were bursting their green calyces, and the white-thorn blossom had sprinkled the hedges with its starry blooms, the Mannerings came back to England, and stayed a few days in London before going to Deepdale.

On the evening of their arrival Ralph came to dinner, and Mabel could not avoid being conscious that his eyes were very often fixed on hers in a sort of vague curiosity, as if his interest in her had deepened since they met last.

She was looking very pale and fragile, he thought, like a snow-flower, that would melt away with a breath. It seemed difficult to believe there existed such a firm will, such intense resolve and domination of self as she had exhibited in her relations with Max—her delicate physique hardly seemed capable of it.

After dinner he joined her where she was sitting, occupying herself with some feminine needlework, while Althea and Captain Averil made up for long arrears of conversation in the window recess, and Mr. and Mrs. Mannering composed themselves for the quiet nap, without which they would hardly have thought life worth living!

"Miss Brooke, I saw a friend of yours yesterday," he said; and he could see from her sudden start and the consciousness in her face that she guessed to whom he alluded.

"You mean Max Vaughan?" she went on with her work, but her fingers trembled.

"Yes; and I have good news to tell you of him. He is now a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and is working like a slave at his profession. His whole mode of life—indeed, his mode of thought as well—has entirely changed. I never saw such an alteration in a man in my life!"

"Thank Heaven!" Mabel murmured, below her breath, and a glad radiance overspread her face.

"He is a splendid fellow!" Ralph added, with more enthusiasm than he usually displayed. "I had no idea he had it in him; but his energy is immense, and he really seems quite devoted to his profession, and could, if he liked, obtain its highest honours. But I don't think he is ambitious; he seems quite content to help other people, without thinking of himself, and goes poking about in all the slums and alleys, doctoring poor wretches from whom there is not the least chance of ever getting any fees. Of course," Ralph added, glancing at her from out of the corner of his eyes, "his former friends were very much astonished when they found he

actually meant hard work, and at first utterly declined to believe in it. However, he has proved them wrong."

Mabel was listening with clasped hands and eager eyes. Her work lay unperched on her lap.

"I am so glad to hear this—so very glad," she said, softly; and, indeed, the news was good beyond her wildest hopes, for not the least part of her trouble had been the fear that after all Max might break down; that her love, so far off as it was, would not be sufficiently strong to uphold him.

"He has been the victim of ill luck," Ralph added, in a still lower voice; "and his faults are due more to circumstances than to anything else, for his disposition is good, and he is generous to a fault. I have known him all my life, so I am in a position to speak with a degree of certainty on the subject. You see he was brought up and spoiled by his uncle, and when he was twenty-one inherited a large fortune, of which he had undisputed control. Then he met—"

Ralph came to a sudden pause, for a deep crimson flush had spread itself all over Mabel's face, and he thought perhaps he had said enough, at any rate for the present.

A few minutes afterwards Mabel quietly stole out and into her own room. She wanted to be alone—to think over what Ralph had told her, and give vent to some of the tumultuous joy that the news had given birth to.

After all, Max had been true to her—true to himself. He had not sunk under the burden of his trouble, but had battled with it—and conquered!

Well, whatever happened now, she felt she could bear it—even the prospect of the long, loveless days that stretched before her in such a dreary blank, and from whose contemplation she had so often turned with sick despair.

She was roused from her reverie by the entrance of Althea, who shared her room, and who now rushed up to her, pale and fearful.

"Oh, Mabel, Mabel! What shall I do—what shall I do?" she sobbed, incoherently, flinging herself on her friend's shoulder.

"Arthur has gone away, and I—I—have—given—him—back—his—ring!"

"Nonsense, Althea!" Mabel said, trying to soothe her; but Althea had made up her mind to cry; and cry she did until she was absolutely exhausted.

"He is a cruel, heartless wretch!" she exclaimed, with vigorous energy, when her sobs had in some degree subsided; "and I hate him! I tell you, I do, Mabel, I hate him like—like—"

She could not find a parallel strong enough, so the sentence remained unfinished.

"Have you really quarrelled with him—and on the very night of your first meeting?"

"Yes; but," eagerly, "it is all his fault, as you will see when I explain. You know that pretty, little gold and enamel slipper I wear on my watch chain?"

"Yes. You mean the one that foreign officer, Baron Valletort, gave you?"

Althea nodded, but carefully refrained from meeting Mabel's eyes.

"Well, Arthur saw it, and asked me where I got it from, and I would not tell him a story, so I said the Baron Valletort gave it me, and it seems he knows the Baron; has met him at balls and at dinners, and declares he is an awful wretch, who flirts with every woman he sees."

"I can quite believe it!" murmured Mabel, rather drily, for she herself had expressed the same opinion of Althea as this—but she did not remind her of it at the present moment.

"Then he accused me of having flirted with him, which," Althea added, with virtuous indignation, "I, of course, denied. Arthur declared I must have done so, or the Baron could never have given me the bijou, and then I got angry, and said if he would not take my word in one thing he would not in another, and perhaps we had better break off our engagement, as we did not seem suited to each other."

"Oh, Althea, did you really say that?"
 "Yes," doggedly; "and I meant it—only I didn't think he would take me at my word. But he did, for he got up. Ralph had gone, you know, and papa and mamma were both asleep. He got up, and said I was right. There could be no chance of happiness for us unless we had confidence in each other; and so he agreed that it would be better we should both be free. With that I took the ring off, and put it in his hand, and turned away. Oh, dear!" breaking off abruptly, "I wish I were dead!"

"No, you don't. The quarrel will be made up to-morrow morning."

"Never!" cried Althea, tragically, and she began to cry again.

"Did Captain Averil accept the ring?" asked Mabel, bringing her back to the point, and at the question Althea dried her tears.

"He did not seem as if he would at first, for he held it in his fingers and looked at it hesitatingly. Then he said, 'Do you mean this, Althea?' And I said I did—meant it quite seriously. 'Very well,' he said, 'remember this is your own doing, but if you think better of it, let me know. It is you who must ask for a reconciliation, not I.' And with that he went. Could anything be more abominable than his conduct?"

"I don't know," cautiously. "Perhaps he thinks it is *your* conduct that deserves that epithet."

"Oh, he is egotistical enough for anything! But there, I don't care. He may keep his ring—or give it to someone else if he likes. It will not hurt me the smallest bit in the world!"

And to prove her words Althea burst into a storm of sobs, that Mabel, with some difficulty, succeeded in quieting.

"Now, will you take my advice?" said the younger girl, when her companion was calmer.

"It all depends on what it is."

"Write to Captain Averil and say you were wrong, and you wish to be friends again."

"I will do nothing of the sort. He shall not think I am so hard up for a lover as all that!"

"Don't be silly, Althea! What is the use of making yourself miserable for nothing?"

"I'm not miserable—at least, I shan't be miserable by the morning."

"Yes you will, because you are in love with him."

"All the more reason why I should not make the first step. Besides, if he shows off like this *before* we are married, what will he do *after*, I should like to know?"

It was useless to try and reason with her while she was in this mood, so Mabel wisely refrained from saying any more, trusting that by morning she would come to her sense.

But when morning came, it only found her resolution hardened. Nevertheless, she evidently had lurking hopes that Averil himself would relent, for she would not go out shopping all day, but sat at the window, dry-eyed and red-cheeked, pretending to occupy herself with some needlework, but really listening for the footstep that never came.

And so the day passed on, and on the next afternoon it was arranged they should all go down to Deepdale together.

Poor Althea looked forward to the journey with dread, for it seemed to her that if she once left London without seeing her recreant lover it meant a final farewell between them; and she really did care for him, in spite of the coquetry so deeply ingrained in her nature, which even her engagement had been powerless to subdue.

However, her pride would not allow her to make any sign, and thus it happened that the return to the Manor, to which she had been looking forward with such eagerness, proved a melancholy sort of occasion after all, and not only to her, but to Mabel as well, for the girl could but remember how happy she had been when she left it last, soon after her betrothal to Max.

The hardship of duty does not consist so

much in the decision by which we select the thorny path, leaving the roses behind us—it consists in those dark days that come after, when even the scent of the roses has vanished and the thorns prick us with every step we take—when the excitement has all gone, and only the consciousness of having chosen the "better part" is left to cheer the monotony of the day's labour.

About a week after their return—Mabel was still at Deepdale—Ralph came down, and Althea had an unpleasant idea that he was quite aware of the reason why her finger was ringless.

"Is there anything up between you and Averil?" he asked her, as they were sitting on the lawn in the spring sunshine. "Because he has all of a sudden exchanged into a regiment ordered for active service, and I expect every day to hear of his embarking."

Poor Althea! She tried hard not to "make a scene," as she herself expressed it; but she had to turn away her face so that Ralph should not see how white it had grown.

Mabel, who was sitting next her, came to her aid.

"When did you see Captain Averil last?"

"The night before last. He came into my rooms, and Max Vaughan happened to be there. Arthur seemed to be rejoicing at the prospect of getting out of England and seeing some fighting; and then, to my great astonishment, Vaughan declared he should like to go too, and said he should volunteer as a surgeon. I told him he had much better remain at home; but he didn't seem to see it, and the result is that he is to accompany the troops to the Soudan, and they will probably set sail this week."

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Mabel left Deepdale she took Althea with her, in the hope that the change of scene might do her good, and make her forget the young officer, who, according to her own idea, had deserted her in such a heartless manner.

On the invitation being given her Althea accepted it listlessly, with the gracious remark that she really cared little where she went, and the Lindens would do as well as anywhere else.

As it proved, it did *better* than anywhere else—or, at all events, she seemed to think so, for she stayed there all the summer, and declared herself in love with the quiet life that Mabel and her aunts led, and loath to leave it.

"I suppose I must have changed a good deal since last year," she said, with a rather sad smile, one midsummer day, when both girls had just come in from a walk, and were having a cup of tea in the drawing-room before taking their things off. "I used to think that life would not be worth living without plenty of tennis, and gaiety, and lots of people; but now I really don't care a scrap about anything of the sort—and never shall again."

"Oh, yes, you will!" Mabel responded, with a quiet smile. "My experience of life tells me you can't lay down unalterable rules at one-and-twenty."

"What about yourself then?"

"Oh, I am different to most girls—I feel quite old, and staid, and dull," she returned, with a slightly nervous laugh; and this was the truth, for all her girlishness had, indeed, departed, leaving in its place a sort of calm serenity which might have become a nun, so little had it to do with the natural buoyancy of youth.

Althea looked at her keenly.

"Do you think you will ever marry, Mabel?"

Before Mabel had time to reply the door was opened quickly, and Miss Euphemia came fluttering into the room like a startled bird.

"Oh, Mabel! such a sad thing—an accident—a luggage-train run into a passenger train!" she exclaimed, with incoherent excitement.

"I have just come up the village, and I met the doctor and his assistant both hurrying off. I wish I could do something to help; but—"

Mabel had started up immediately, and it was characteristic of her that even while her aunt was speaking she had tied her bonnet-strings, and picked up a châtelaine—a useful sort of thing, containing needle-case, scissors, knife, &c.—which was lying on a table close at hand.

In a few minutes she was at the scene of the accident, and doing her best to assist the sufferers! Oh! the irony of fate! Among them wounded to death was Max's divorced wife. Even in her bitter agony Mabel did everything possible for her—even had her carried with all tenderness to the Lindens, where she was placed in Mabel's own bed—for there was not time to make up another; and then Mabel waited upon her with untiring devotion, of which, however, she was entirely oblivious, for though she opened her eyes now and again, and looked round her wonderingly, they were closed almost instantly without having rested on her nurse.

Later on the doctor came and gave her an opiate, under whose influence she grew calmer, and presently fell into an uneasy slumber.

"I think she must have been travelling alone, for no one has made inquiries after her, and she does not seem to have had any luggage," he said, drawing Mabel on one side, "I can't quite make her out. She is well-dressed, but she does not seem to be exactly a lady for all that. I suppose she has said nothing by which you have been able to obtain a clue to her relations?"

Mabel shook her head—she did not think there was any necessity to tell Dr. Marston that she and his patient had met before, since the knowledge could not possibly be of any avail.

"There can be no doubt that her injuries are dangerous, and may perhaps be fatal," he continued, gravely. "Of course, one ought to communicate with her relations, but if we don't know who they are, it is out of the question. Don't you think you had better have a professional nurse in, Miss Brooke? Sitting up all night won't be a good thing for you."

But Mabel declined to accept the suggestion, saying that, if she were tired, Althea would help her; and, indeed, the latter was most anxious to take her place at the bedside, in order that her friend might take some rest.

"No," said Mabel, "I am going to watch to-night, and you shall replace me in the morning. I don't mind sitting up the least bit in the world; and, you must remember, I am a good deal stronger than I look."

As a matter of fact, if she had gone to bed it is very doubtful whether she would have slept, for her nerves were all in a state of tension with excitement; and, besides, she would have regarded the abandonment of her post as a sort of moral cowardice unworthy of her.

It was a relief when all the rest of the household had retired, and she was sitting quietly by the bedside watching the sleeper, and wondering where Max was at that moment, and what his sensations would be if by some necromancy this scene could be shown to him.

News of him had come now and again through the mediumship of the newspapers, which always mentioned him in terms of the highest praise, commending his courage, his prudence, his devotion, all of which, they said, were unequalled; but, for all that, Mabel never took up the *Times* but with a sinking heart, for she knew that his comrades were falling daily, and why should he be exempt from the lot that had overtaken them?

These last few weeks had been terribly anxious both for her and Althea. Poor Althea! who had found out she cared a great deal more for Averil than she had thought possible, and would have given ten years of her life to be able to undo the folly of that one night when she had sent him from her!

These thoughts were slipping idly through Mabel's mind as she kept her vigil by the light

of a shaded lamp, turned low so as not to fall on the eyes of the sleeper, who was moving restlessly about, as if even the narcotic had not been able to still the remembrance of pain.

Mabel looked at her attentively, and, dim as the light was, it was yet sufficient to show the lines and wrinkles in a face that, if its owner had but lived a different life, Time would scarcely yet have touched. It was even more worn and haggard than it had been when the young girl had seen it last, for now it was destitute of those artificial accessions that had lent it a fictitious bloom. The rouge and powder had been both washed off, and the skin was absolutely ghastly in its faded pallor!

At about three o'clock—the time when vitality is at its lowest ebb—the patient awoke, and there came a startled look of recognition into her eyes as they fell on Mabel bending over her.

Her pain was less acute, and this made her powers of observation keener.

"You are Mabel Brooke!" she exclaimed, quickly. "What brings you here?"

"You have been hurt, and I had you carried to this house, because it was near," the girl responded, in low, even tones.

"Yes. There was a railway accident. I remember!" she shuddered. "Am I hurt very much?"

"We hope not," evasively.

"I don't see why you should hope not," the invalid said, with a return of her old sneering tone. "My death would not do you any harm!"

"It has not struck me to think whether it would do me harm or good!" Mabel rejoined. "But I certainly hope very much that you will soon be better! Will you try and eat a little jelly—you have had nothing for so long?"

The sick woman tried to raise herself on her elbow, but the effort was too much for her, and she sank back with a low groan. Her agony seemed awful, and Mabel sent for Dr. Marsden, but before he could arrive all necessity for his presence was gone. The suffering, sinful soul had winged its flight to that high tribunal, where, we may reverentially hope, mercy tempered justice when its sentence was delivered!

CHAPTER VII.

It was in October that Max Vaughan came back to England—a very thin, pale, and shadowy likeness of the Max who had gone out, and with his right arm carried in a sling.

The first person he went to see in London was Ralph Mannering, and it need hardly be said that the welcome he received was a very cordial one.

"You certainly look very seedy, old fellow!" said Ralph, sympathetically, after the first greetings were over. "You want a dose of the country air, and some good port wine to set you up."

"Oh, I shall soon be all right now that I am once more in England!" the young man returned. "It seems to me as if the sight of your cheerful old phiz has done me good already. I was down with the fever some time, and then a bullet through my arm prevented my doing any surgical work, so I thought I might as well come back. Now tell me how everybody is? How?"—his voice was not quite steady as he asked the question—"how is Mabel?"

"She is very well; but"—in some surprise—"have you not heard from her?"

"No. I have heard from no one for a long time. The mail-bags got lost, and we were moving about so quickly; besides, as a matter of fact, you were the only person who was likely to write to me. Are your family all right?"

"Yes, except Althea, who despises tennis parties, and won't go to balls. By the way, did you see much of Avril?"

"Not very much. He has distinguished

himself several times in action though; but he hasn't seemed to me particularly cheerful ever since he left England. I fancied his depression had something to do with your sister."

"They are a couple of young fools, and want some common sense knocked into their heads!" exclaimed Ralph, with energy. "I am going to Deepdale Manor to-morrow. Will you come with me?"

Max hesitated.

"I suppose I ought to go straight to my uncle's."

"You can go there from our house. Do come, there's a good fellow! The governor, and the mater, and Althea will be so glad to see you; and as for me—well, I needn't say anything about myself, need I?"

Max allowed himself to be persuaded, for, in point of fact, he and Ralph were devoted to each other, though after the fashion of males, they took all possible pains to disguise their affection!

And so, the next afternoon, he found himself driving up the avenue at Deepdale in a cab they had hired at the station, and very naturally his thoughts went back to the last time he had arrived there, and unconsciously he heaved a deep sigh.

"What's the matter?" asked Ralph, who had sent a telegram to his mother in the morning, apprising her of the fact that he should bring Max down there with him.

"I was thinking of Mabel," Vaughan returned, rather shamefacedly.

His friend made no reply, and in another moment the house came in-view, with its porch covered with scarlet creeper, and a group of people standing at the door waiting to welcome the visitors.

"My dear boy, how ill you look!" cried Mrs. Mannering (who was famed for saying very tactless things), when she saw Max, but her greeting made up for its awkwardness in the warmth with which it was given. She even insisted on kissing the bronzed, bearded man; while Althea, moved by the sight of his broken arm, and perhaps other ideas that it suggested, burst into a flood of tears, and beat a precipitate retreat.

"What the deuce—" began Ralph, but he was stopped by his mother, who said hastily: "Don't take any notice, Ralph. Your sister is not quite well—her nerves are upset."

"She's gone clean daft, it strikes me!" rejoined Ralph, with a certain amount of contempt, and then he looked round anxiously as if he expected to see someone else; and being disappointed, glanced inquiringly at his mother, who nodded in a mysterious manner, and drawing him on one side whispered a few words in his ear.

Max, meanwhile, was being fussed up by the Squire, who, on the strength of his having been with the troops and assisted at one or two actions, was inclined to regard him as a hero, rather to the young man's discomfort.

"Old fellow!" said Ralph, returning to his side, "will you go into the drawing-room and wait there till I come back? I'm going to see what's become of that ridiculous girl, Althea. Perhaps when I've given her a good talking to she may show some symptoms of coming to her senses."

"Don't be hard on her, Ralph," murmured Max, with that fellow-feeling for Althea which is said to make us wondrous kind, and then he went into the drawing-room, rather wondering why none of the rest of the family accompanied him there.

A flood of golden sunlight came into the room through one of the open casements, and for the moment almost blinded him with its brightness; then he became aware of a motionless figure standing in the embrasure of the window, and his heart gave a great throb.

Could it be—yes, it was—Mabel!

She turned round slowly, a great joy in her face, and a certain tremulous shyness in her manner that struck him as quite new.

In remembrance of his oft-expressed preference, she had put on a white dress of some

soft, partly diaphanous stuff, gathered in at the waist by a quaint silver belt of Indian workmanship, that he had taken down to her on the occasion of his first visit to the Lindens—for she had returned none of his presents, except the ring of betrothal itself.

Max stood for a moment unable to speak for very delight. Like this, he had so often pictured her in his dreams—clad in white, and with those sweet, starry eyes turning to his, filled with unutterable love.

As for her, whatever maidenly modesty might have kept her from seeking his caresses under ordinary conditions, was swept away now by the sight of his pallor, and the signs of recent illness that were so plainly visible in his appearance, and with a little plaintive cry she came up to him, and put both her arms round his neck.

"My poor Max!"

He drew her to his bosom with a long-drawn sigh that was almost a sob. For a moment he forgot everything save that she was in his arms, forgot the gulf that lay between them, and even his surprise at her own action.

"You have been ill?" she said, pitifully, drawing herself away, and leading him with almost motherly tenderness to the settee, where they both sat down. "Tell me all that has happened since I saw you last?"

"I don't feel as if I could tell you anything, save the delight I feel in seeing you once more," he returned, his eyes never leaving her face, with its lovely flower-tints.

She blushed prettily, and said, almost gaily,—

"We will take that for granted. When did you come to England?"

"Yesterday!"

"And you were very rejoiced to get back?"

"I don't know," with a weary sigh. "I sometimes used to think that I never would come back—that any place would be better for me than England; only after the fever a terrible home sickness came upon me, and I suppose I was weak and unable to resist it."

"When did you get my letter?" she asked, very softly, and with averted head.

"Your letter! Did you write to me?"

"Yes."

"I never received it then."

"And Ralph has told you nothing?" asked Mabel, beginning to tremble a little.

"No. What is there to tell? Ah!" he exclaimed, starting up, with a sudden idea. "I think I can guess it. I—oh! I dare not put it into words."

He got up, and began to pace the room with quick, uneven footsteps, pausing at last before her.

"Do you mean that you are going to be married? Tell me at once. I will try and bear it."

She saw the mistake he had fallen into, and if his face had not been so full of pain she would have smiled at it. She only bowed her head.

"Well!" Max said, making a desperate effort at self control, "I suppose I have no right to be either sorry or surprised—in fact, I ought to be glad that you are going to be happy; but," very bitterly, "it's no use pretending what I don't feel, and so I won't tell a lie. I am not glad—I am horribly jealous, and angry, and miserable. I wish I had died out there in the Soudan."

"Max!"

"I mean it. What is the use of living now? I managed to get along after being separated from you a year ago, because there was still the chance of showing you what your love was capable of effecting in my moral being. I worked hard, I got rid of all my old habits that I knew were distasteful to you, for I was resolved your faith in me should be justified. But now—" He broke down utterly, and threw himself on the settee, covering his face with his left hand.

"And now," said Mabel very gently, putting her own hands on his, "that you have convinced me my trust was not betrayed, you

have surely reaped the reward in the fact that you have been true to yourself, as well as to me."

He did not reply for some minutes, then he let his hand fall.

"I'm a selfish brute, Mabel; I know I am, without you or anyone else telling me," he said, with a certain amount of self-reproach. "I ought to be ashamed of myself—and so I am. How could I expect you to sacrifice your future just because I happen to be in love with you? As for Ralph, he is staunch and true, and, with a gulp, 'one of the best fellows in the world!'"

"I know it," said Mabel. "Nevertheless,"—mischievously—"I am not going to be more to him than the friend I always have been."

"You are not going to be married?"

Mabel's eyes drooped, and a little tremulous smile curved her lips.

"I did not say I was not going to be married,—indeed, I hope I am; but I am not going to be married to Ralph Mannering!"

"To whom, then?"

"To you, Max—if you will have me!"

And then, to Max's extreme surprise and satisfaction, she nestled close to him, and laid her pretty head confidently on his shoulder.

"But Mabel—that other!"

Then she told him of his divorced wife's death, and Max was not hypocrite enough to feign grief, although he was unfeignedly shocked at the manner in which the poor woman had met with her fatal accident.

Perhaps the point that struck him most was the fact that the accident should have taken place where it did, and that it should have been Mabel who closed the dead woman's eyes.

Anyhow, the barrier that divided them was now broken down, and he was free to wed the girl he loved—the girl who had proved herself stronger even than her love—free to forget all the bitterness and misery of the past, knowing full well that the happiness of the golden future would more than redeem it!

They were married the week before Christmas—very quietly indeed, the ceremony taking place in the parish church, and the only guests being the Mannerings and Sir Richard Vaughan.

Some time afterwards Captain Averil came back from the Soudan as Major Averil, and a few days after his arrival he received a small box, inside which, wrapped up very carefully in cotton wool, was a little gold and enamelled slipper, that he instantly recognised as the one which had caused the quarrel between himself and his fiancée.

Averil's reply to this unwritten message was a prompt appearance at Deepdale Manor, where everyone was much surprised to see him—Althea most of all—and that same evening it was announced to all whom it might concern that their engagement was renewed, and that they intended marrying as soon as the trousseau could be prepared.

[THE END]

In every walk of life work is a powerful antidote for low spirits. The busy have no time to be sad. The saying, "Labour is prayer," is never truer than when applied to the grief-stricken; and to those whose woes are more fancied than real, but none the less productive of discomfort on that account, toil will afford a speedier and surer relief than any other remedy ever devised by man. Try hard work then, bodily or mental, or both, as the best cure for a fit of the "blues."

DR. CHAMBERS truly says: "Observation shows that a secular Sunday rests upon a sacred Sunday. Guarantee the day of rest by a religious sanction, and you secure it permanently; give up any such sanction, and you imperil the whole institution. There would still be a Sunday, but it would be neither a holy day nor a day of rest."

FACTS.

MILK TOAST. "Here's to the pump!"

Most business men believe in the law and the profits.

You can smell some men's "smiles," even when you can't see them.

THE plea of the financially embarrassed swain is "Love me little, love me short."

"Sax, John, is your sweetheart a factory girl?" "Yes, William—satisfactory."

"Oh, for a thousand tongues!" sighed a tramp, as he finished a cold tongue sandwich.

THERE is no such word in the dictionary as cant; but there is an abundance of it in society.

A FELLOW who went to see a girl who wore diamonds, said that she sparkled while he sparkled.

A JUDGE was recently maimed, paradoxical as it may appear, by the court plaster falling on him.

THEY put tacks in a carpet to keep it down, but they put tax on tobacco to keep it up. Strange, isn't it?

BOOKS are so cheap now that the poorest people can buy and own them, and the richest can borrow and keep them.

A MURDERER says he was convicted in a trial by newspapers. He evidently does not believe in paper hanging.

SHE: "Why, Charlie, what a pile of letters! Billets dour, I suppose?" HE: "Not at my time of life, dear. Billies overdue."

"ART is long, and time is fleeting," remarked the young portrait-painter, as he introduced his watch to the pawnbroker.

MISS GOLDBY: "How does my new gown strike you, papa?" PAPA (laconically): "For about ten pounds, I suppose, my dear!"

"WITNESS, did you ever see the prisoner at the bar?" "Oh, yes; that's where I got acquainted with him!"

"A LASS" and "Alas!" are not synonymous expressions, but the one frequently follows the other naturally, and with much appropriateness.

WAITER (to departing guest): "Do you know, sir, that you remind me forcibly of the Spaniards at the capture of Grenada?" Departing guest: "How so?" Waiter: "You gave no quarter."—*American Paper.*

"I GENERALLY pick my company," said Mrs. Yeast, haughtily. "Yes, I am aware of it," replied Mrs. Crimsonbeak, sarcastically; "but you wait until they have left your house, and then you pick them to pieces."

"WHAT a splendid parrot that is of Brown's! So intelligent, you know!" "Intelligent? Why, one would almost think him human. He repeats everything he hears."

HE: "Getting married seems to be very dangerous now. No fewer than seven brides have been instantly killed on their wedding-day this year." SHE (ingenuously): "But no true woman will shrink her duty, Tom, through a craven fear of death."

INSTRUCTOR (sternly): "Mr. Freshly, this is the third time that you have handed in only three pages of written matter, while the rest of the class hand in five." Freshly: "91: 'Yes, sir; but'—struck with a bright idea—"I use ever so much thicker paper."

A PARTICULAR old gentleman, pulling something out of his soup that should not have been included among the other ingredients, thus addressed his cook: "Josephine, I am much obliged for your thoughtfulness, but next time kindly give it to me in a locker."

BOBBY (to young Mr. Fatboy): "I heard my sister Clara say something lovely to me about you, Mr. Fatboy." Young Mr. Fatboy (anxiously): "No, did you, Bobby? What was it?" Bobby: "She said you would be lovely to sit on the family Bible and press autumn leaves."

"PAPA brought home a ferocious dog this evening, George," she said, nervously, "and although he said he would tie him up I am afraid he might have forgotten it." "Don't worry, dear," replied George, with tender reassurance. "Remember I am a book-agent, and there is only one dog."

"SIR," said a gentleman in a crowd, "do you know that you are pushing me unnecessarily?" "Sir," said the gentleman addressing the party immediately behind him, "do you know that you are pushing the gentleman ahead of me unnecessarily?" Then he turned to the first speaker and said, "I've passed it down the line."

"CHARLIE," she said, softly, "I often think what a noble thing it is to have a sphere and fill it as you ought." "Have you?" returned Charlie, after some study. "Yes. And I have often wondered what my particular work in life is." "Indeed," replied Charlie, after some hesitation. "Charlie, tell me, do you think I am fitted to make a home happy?" "I dunno," said he, absently. "Can you cook?"

INFORMATION WANTED.—An authority expresses the opinion that, "If you are a married man your wife can compel you to support her. If you are not, she can't." Seems as if that was sound law. But suppose the wife of the man who is not married should elope with the husband of an old maid who was single from choice—would he then be obliged to support her? On the contrary, wouldn't he have good grounds for a divorce?

A CERTAIN old lady has the genuine genius of Mrs. Partington, and may have been the original of that famous character, for all we know. Not long ago she was telling of the wild times in the woods down there before the country was settled. "Why," said she, "the folks used to be waked up in the night by the howling of the pamphlets in the woods!" It is to be inferred that she meant "panthers," though no doubt there have been such things as howling pamphlets.

A WELL KNOWN citizen entered his house with an expression of the deepest disgust, recently, and said: "Mary, I am surprised at your childishness." "What do you mean?" "Why haven't you got a lot of doll's clothing strung along the clothes-line where everybody can see it?" "Doll's clothing? Why, there's nothing of the kind on the line." "Well, what do you call those toy trousers about two inches long, out there?" "Why, that's the pair of trousers you bought in June, which you said would never shrink." "Well, I'll have to use 'em for a cover for my opera-glass."

A NEW INVENTION.—A University man has invented what he calls a calorimeter, an instrument for testing the heat of the head. So delicate is the instrument that it will "record the heat generated by the agitation of the wings of a bee." The amount of heat thus generated is not given, but it is the opinion of the small boy who has fooled with the bee, that it is, at least, 900 degrees less than the heat produced by the terminus of the insect. If the University man doesn't want his calorimeter wrecked beyond the hope of repair, he'd better not test it on a hot-headed politician.

TO BE WELL SHAKEN BEFORE TAKEN.—A hygienic journal tells "How to Take Medicine." It is about time a new method of taking medicine was introduced. Medicine is as hard to take as good advice. Castor oil, for instance; one dose taken in childhood will linger on the taste as long as life lasts. Some of the concoctions prescribed for a sick man is such a terrible aggregation of all the awful stuffs ever conceived by the ingenuity of the disciples of Esculapius, that the patient cheerfully welcomes death after the first taste. He hopes death may arrive before the hour named for taking the second dose. Hence, fellow-sufferers, the best way to take medicine is to hire a well-man to take it for you; or bribe the nurse to take it; and throw it out of the window. It will "go right to the spot," all the same.

SOCIETY.

THE Prince of Wales's tenants' ball on Twelfth Night was a brilliant success. Their Royal Highnesses and the Princesses Louise, Victoria, and Maud, and the guests staying at the house, were present. The tenants of the principal estates in Norfolk were invited, and the festivities were prolonged to a late hour.

THE New Year came in right merrily at Berlin, and the last week or two was a rare time of enjoyment. Ice and snow everywhere, sleighs in all directions, for everybody has taken to sleighing, from the smallest boy, with his hand sledge, to the Emperor and the great people, who seem to vie with each other with their bright-coloured cloths, splendid horses, costly fur wraps, and fur-capped and coated coachmen. All the ponds are frozen, and covered with skaters, and the beautiful places of ornamental water in the Thier Garten are rendezvous of all that is bright, brilliant, and fashionable.

Some of the skating is quite wonderful, and there are always crowds round the performers, who evidently enjoy the admiration and attention. A great many of the women skate beautifully, and are becomingly and picturesquely got up in bright colours and warm furs. Red, of a rich hue, is decidedly popular, and also dark blue, with gold trimmings. Some carry large fur muffa, others dainty arrangements of cloth, and velvet, and fur, and generally made to match the hat or the costume. Military and other bands perform by the ice, which adds to the charm of the scene.

THE aspect of the Egyptian Hall, when the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress gave the annual Juvenile Fancy Ball, was all the more brilliant by contrast with the fog and dreariness without. It did not seem, however, at all to have diminished the number of guests, over a thousand being present. The programme differs but little from year to year. By half past six the young people began to arrive, and the host and hostess were present to receive the company in the saloon, surrounded by the Mace and Sword Bearer, and the other civic dignitaries.

Perhaps the prettiest scene of all was when a juvenile procession, the exact counterpart of that which but shortly before had taken up its position, was presented to the entertainers; the only difference being that, whereas the veritable Lord Mayor wore a velvet Court suit and jewelled badge, his prototype, Master Davis, appeared in the full-flowered robe and cocked hat. The little Lady Mayoress, the daughter of the City Marshal, wore a pinky heliotrope dress, trimmed with white lace and many diamonds; and the Lady Mayoress in propria persona a rich heliotrope poult de soie, with black lace and ostrich feathers. The City Marshal's son personated his father, in red, gold-bedizened uniform; Masters Horace and Herbert Higge were the juvenile Sheriffs; Master Dent the Mace Bearer, carrying a real mace appertaining to St. Bride's Parish, while Master Clitheroe Smith was the Train Bearer.

When the time came for the children to walk in procession round the hall, they naturally attracted much attention. There were many original dresses. Mr. A. A. Beckett's three sons were dressed as pilgrims on the road to the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury, in the time of Chaucer. They wore white palmer robes, sandled shoes, and shingled hats of the period; they carried in their hands the pilgrim's staff and cockle shell. Miss Ursula Soulsby, the daughter of the Lord Mayor's secretary, in a Grecian dress like that of Galatea, made of soft cream silk, with a bordering of gold braid, was a most graceful personation. Sir Charles Warren's only son wore a very perfect Byce costume.

STATISTICS.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS.—The births registered in 1886 numbered 903,866, and were in the proportion of 32.4 to 1,000 persons living. This is the lowest rate recorded since 1848, when the rate was also 32.4. The male births numbered 460,470, and the female births numbered 443,396, the former being to the latter in the proportion of 1,039 to 1,000; the mean proportion in the preceding ten years having been 1,038 to 1,000. The infants registered as born out of wedlock numbered 42,898, and were in the proportion of 1.5 to 1,000 persons living, a lower rate than in any previous year. The proportion of births registered as illegitimate to total births was 4.7 to 1,000, the mean proportion for the ten preceding years having been 4.9 per 1,000. In the registration counties the proportion varied from 3.2 in the extra-metropolitan portion of Middlesex, 3.4 in Essex, and 3.8 in London, to 7.2 in Norfolk, 7.5 in North Wales, 7.9 in Cumberland, 8.0 in Herefordshire, and 8.9 in Shropshire. These differences between counties repeat themselves with much constancy. The deaths registered in 1886 numbered 537,276, and were in the proportion of 19.3 to 1,000 persons living. The rate in 1885 had been 19.0, and in 1881 had been 18.9, but with these two exceptions the rate in 1886 was the lowest yet recorded. In each of the six years, 1881-6, the death rate was below 20.0 per 1,000, having been above 20.0 in every other year since civil registration began. The rate ranged from 14.7 in Westmorland, 16.1 in the extra-metropolitan part of Surrey, and 16.0 in Sussex, to 21.0 in South Wales, 21.9 in Lancashire, 22.1 in Cornwall, and 23.1 in Monmouthshire. Among the deaths were 71 of reputed centenarians, 27 of whom were males and 44 females. In 1885 and 1884 the numbers had been 63 and 58 respectively. The deaths ascribed to zymotic or specific febrile diseases numbered 73,747, being in the proportion of 2.648 to a million persons living, a proportion which, though not actually the lowest as yet recorded, was far below the average of the decennium 1871-80.

GEMS.

WHEN worthy men quarrel, only one of them may be faulty at the first; but if strife continue long, commonly both become guilty.

WE cannot suppose that a period of time will ever arrive when the world, or any considerable portion of it, shall have come up abreast with great minds, so as to comprehend them fully.

METHOD in everything is incalculably valuable. It promotes comfort. It saves a large expenditure of time. It avoids numberless inconveniences. It is of great moment in relation to mind and character.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

To take rust from finely polished steel, such as drawing instruments, etc., without scratching them, mix ten parts of tin putty, eight of prepared buck's horn, and twenty-five of alcohol to a paste. Cleanse the article with this, and finally rub with soft blotting paper. To prevent their rusting, preserve them by a coat of colourless lacquer.

FIRST-RATE COUGH DROPS.—Tincture of squills two ounces, camphorated tincture of opium and tincture of tolu, of each a quarter ounce, wine of ipecac. half ounce, oil of wintergreen four drops, anacardias three drops, and of aniseed oil, two drops. The above mixture is to be put into five pounds of candy which is just ready to take from the fire, and continue the boiling a little longer.

MISCELLANEOUS.

A HIGH sense of honour, a determination never to take a mean advantage of another—an adherence to truth—delicacy and politeness toward those with whom you may have dealings—are the essential and distinguishing characteristics of a gentleman.

How easy it is for one to say a thing from which he can never fully recover himself as long as he lives. He may be sorry, and ask and receive the pardon of men, but in their estimation he is never afterward the same man as he was before. "Keep thy heart with all diligence," and tongue, too.

THE best things are nearest; breath in your nostrils, light in your eyes, flowers at your feet, duties at your hand, the path of God just before you. Then do not grasp at the stars, but do life's plain, common work as it comes, certain that daily duties and daily bread are the sweet things of life.

THE DIET OF STRONG MEN.—The Roman soldiers, who built such wonderful roads, and carried a weight of armour and luggage that would crush the average farm hand, lived on coarse brown bread and sour wine. They were temperate in diet, and regular and constant in exercise. The Spanish peasant works every day, and dances half the night, yet eats only his black bread, onion and watermelon. The Smyrna porter eats only a little fruit and some olives, yet he walks off with a load of a hundred pounds. The coolie, fed on rice, is more active and can endure more than the negro fed on fat meat. The heavy work of the world is not done by men who eat the greatest quantity. Moderation in diet seems to be the pre-requisite of endurance.

CHANGE and consistency are by no means incompatible. The principle of life includes that of growth, and all growth is indicated by change. The entire history of the plant, from the tiny seed swelling in the soil to the full luxuriance of blossom or fruit, is one of change in growth; and is thus, and only thus, a consistent whole. The life of the human body, from frail infancy to sturdy manhood, is one continuous series of changes, each of which is needful to its perfection. If this be so in all life, why should an exception be made in the life of the mind and the heart? Certainly, if this may not change, the very centre of all life itself must be suspended. It will, however, be conceded that the changes of mental growth from early life to maturity are rightful and needful.

ARCTIC COLD.—A person who has never been in the polar regions can probably have no idea of what cold really is; but by reading the terrible experience of arctic travellers in that icy region, some notion can be formed of the extreme cold that prevails there. When we have the temperature below freezing-point out of doors, we think it bitterly cold, and, if our houses were not as warm as, say, sixty degrees above zero, we should begin to talk of freezing. Think, then, of living where the thermometer goes down to thirty-five degrees below zero in the house, in spite of the stove. Of course in such a case the fur garments are piled on until a man looks like a great bundle of skins. Dr. Moss of the English polar expedition of 1875 and 1876, among other odd things, tells of the effect of cold on a wax candle which he burned. The temperature was thirty-five degrees below zero, and the doctor must have been considerably discouraged when, upon looking at his candle, he discovered that the flame had all it could do to keep warm. It was so cold that the flame could not melt all the wax of the candle, but was forced to eat its way down the candle, leaving a sort of skeleton of the candle standing. There was heat enough, however, to melt oddly shaped holes in the thin walls of wax, and the result was a beautiful lace-like cylinder of white, with a tongue of yellow flame burning inside of it, and sending out into the darkness many streaks of light.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

B. B.—A splendid specimen of penmanship.

M. H. L.—Salisbury Cathedral is 404 feet high.

L. M. C.—France sold Louisiana to the United States for \$2,000,000.

C. H.—The present named can be made with "perfect propriety."

H. P. S.—Most excellent, but indicating no special trait of character.

W. S. V.—1 and 2. Neither would be proper on "a very slight acquaintance."

M. J. P.—Yes; but consult a lawyer before doing so, in regard to the custody of the children.

L. B. S.—Laurel or bay leaves are used to pack round figs in their boxes to keep insects from them.

W. G.—"E. A. A." is given a few facts concerning Cato the Younger and the expulsion of the Tarquins.

D. C.—Seventeen-year-old girls average between 75 and 90 pounds in weight, with a height of 5 feet or 5 feet 1 inch.

M. M.—The nicotine can be taken out of a meerschaum pipe, so that it can be again coloured, by boiling it in alcohol.

E. F. P.—In the event of the death of the Prince of Wales, his eldest son would be first in the order of succession.

MARTIN.—No charge is made for answering queries in this column, it being a source of pleasure to us to thus oblige our readers to the best of our ability.

E. C.—1. Rest satisfied with the assurances of love, and in a comparatively short time he will doubtless propose marriage. 2. Very neat.

ANXIOUS FENELLA.—1. Take plenty of exercise and a good tonic. 2. For the singing and playing nothing will help but earnest practice under the supervision of a good master.

G. L. F.—1. Boiled potatoes are more easily digested than those fried in butter or lard, as both the latter, in a heated state, have a tendency to retard that natural process. 2. Dark-brown hair.

W. T.—You are decidedly good-looking, and there seems no reason for marring your natural beauty by wearing a scowl at any and all times. It would be very easy to dispense with such a drawback.

LIZIE.—You are a pretty little girl enough, and are young enough to afford to wait till "somebody comes to woo." Let him be offended. You were quite right, and in his own mind he thought all the more of you.

E. W. J.—Cain is said to have married a native of the land of Nod, situated, it is presumed, to the east of the Garden of Eden, where he had taken up his abode after murdering his brother. The name of this woman is not mentioned in Holy Writ.

G. C.—1. The great Boston (U.S.) fire occurred November 9 and 10, 1872. It originated at the corner of Sumner and Kingston-streets. 2. The area burnt was about sixty-five acres. Loss about \$16,000,000. The number of lives lost did not exceed 15.

FIVE STARS.—If the lady's parents object to the match you should endeavour to point out to them your ability to care for her in a style becoming her present station in life. In these efforts you can be ably seconded by the one you so ardently desire to make your life partner.

J. W.—No wonder the parents of the young girl objected to her queer antics. It is simply preposterous to think that any father or mother would allow a mere child to associate with a man many years her senior, and they should see to it that if mild means will not produce the desired result, much harsher are adopted.

L. L. L.—It depends altogether on their former relations, or terms of intimacy, the time, the hour and other little circumstances, whether young ladies should invite their male escorts who have accompanied them from church or elsewhere to enter the house. No special rule, therefore, can be laid down, as it would not be applicable in every case.

G. W.—Unless on very intimate terms with a member of the sterner sex, a lady should not ask for or exchange photographs with him. This degree of intimacy cannot be reached in one year's acquaintance. He will doubtless manage to exist during the absence of both yourself and photograph, the mental picture being sufficient to continually remind him of you.

R. T.—A lady so thoroughly equipped as yourself should find but little difficulty in getting a position as a confidential clerk or amanuensis, as your knowledge of type-writing and short-hand would serve as a first-class recommendation. We could not, however, recommend you to a firm in London or any other city. Doubtless some of your friends would be only too happy to secure you such a position if they were made acquainted with the facts.

OSCAR.—The term perpetual motion means an engine which, without any supply of power from without, cannot only maintain its own motion for ever, or as long as its machinery lasts, but can also be applied to drive machinery, and therefore to do external work. In other words, it means a device for creating power or energy without corresponding expenditure of energy. This is an absolute impossibility, although from the earliest days scientists and inventors have endeavoured to prove otherwise.

L. L.—Snorri Sturluson, or Sturluson, was a learned historian and distinguished Icelandic politician, born in 1178 at Hvamms, Iceland, where his family, who traced their descent to the ancient kings of Norway and Sweden, had been settled since the early colonization of the island. His greatest work is entitled "Heimskringla," or Mythic Ring of the World, in which is recorded the history of the kings of Norway from the earliest times to the Death of Magnus Erlingsson, in 1177. He was murdered in 1241.

A. L.—The property which has caused you annoyance in the use of glycerine is its strong affinity for water. Although glycerine has a pleasant and sweetish taste yet the first sensation, when it is applied to the tongue, is one of pain and burning. This is caused by the fact that glycerine absorbs all the moisture from the surface that it touches and thus dries up and parches the skin. Pure glycerine applied to the chafed hands of infants causes great pain. Glycerine ought always to be first mixed with at least an equal bulk of water in order to remove its burning action. This done it may be safely applied to the most tender surfaces, and it does not dry up, but maintains the parts in a constantly moist condition, promoting the healing process.

E. P. P.—As a general rule the disease known as roup is caused by a poorly-ventilated, overcrowded, damp and dirty chicken-house. The remedy is to clear out the head and nostrils with a small syringe filled with a mild solution of cyprusine water, or a little coal-oil into which has been mixed a drop or two of carbolic acid. It should be injected into each nostril. A sewing-machine oil-can will answer if a syringe is not at hand. Asafetida in small quantities should be given in the food night and morning, and the roosting-place kept scrupulously clean. The affected subjects should be separated from the healthy ones as soon as the disease is sufficiently developed to make it certain that it is roup.

WHAT COULD I DO WITHOUT YOU?

They tell me, dear wife, 't would be good for my health
To travel through Spain or Peru,
To tarry in France, and on Italy's ganges;
But how could I go without you?

They tell me that I might accumulate wealth,
That riches would surely accrue,
If I did thus and so; but little they know
How poor I should be without you.

They talk about scenes that have given them joy,
And urge me their beauties to view,
And I listen and say, "I'll go there some day;"
But I don't mean to go without you.

For it's little I care for the pleasures of life,
That many with ardour pursue;
For exquisite sights, or social delights,
Unless I can share them with you.

'Tis nice to have riches, and live at our ease;
But I'd rather, my dear—'t is true—
Be as poor as a rat in poverty's flat,
Than live in great style without you.

Your love is the sunshine that brings me good cheer
Whenever I'm anxious or blue;
And if you should leave me, alas! how I'd grieve!
For what would life be without you?
J. P.

D. D.—The addition of a few drops of glycerine to a bottle of mucilage will cause labels to which it is applied to adhere to tin or other polished surfaces when not exposed to a high degree of heat or moisture. Gum tragacanth mucilage is also to be depended upon for that purpose.

JOEY says that several months ago her little daughter put her shoulder out of joint, or so a doctor said who was called to see her two months after the accident. Before this another physician had treated the child for partial paralysis. The second doctor put the arm in place and gave several things to rub the joint with, but for all this the child cannot lift her hand to her head. "What ought to be done about it?" asks the mother. It would be best to consult a good surgeon. The joint may not be properly in place, or there may be only a stiffness of the ligaments. The shoulder should be constantly rubbed and the arm exercised in spite of the slight pain it may be to the child. Any strengthening liniment, or even warm salt water and whisky, is good. It is the rubbing with the hand that does more good than liniment.

H. C. C.—Many remedies are suggested for the prevention of chicken cholera, and it seems as if vaccination was the surest. This is accomplished by vaccinating a hen, and in eight days her system will be inoculated. Then cut off her head and catch the blood in a vessel, after which pour it out on paper to dry. Half a drop of it is sufficient to vaccinate one fowl. Catch the chickens one by one, and with a pin or knife make a scratch on the thigh (just enough to draw blood); then moisten a little piece of the paper containing the dried blood, and place it on the fowl's leg where that member was scratched. This is said to be an infallible remedy. Disinfect the hen-house and grounds with a mixture composed of three pounds of sulphuric acid in forty gallons of water, being sure to wear every place in the most thorough manner. One of the many cures consists of a tea made by pouring hot water over strong plug tobacco, and mixing up a dough with it which is fed to the fowls three times a day.

A. L. M.—There is nothing in any of the matters mentioned that really signify anything. It is, however, alleged by the superstitious that the hair coming to a peak on the forehead of a lady indicates that she will be a widow. We do not pretend to decipher dreams. 2. Fair.

R. R. T.—Joseph Bonaparte, the oldest brother of the great Napoleon, was married to Julie Marie Clary, the daughter of a wealthy citizen of Marseilles and sister-in-law of Bernadotte, King of Sweden, April 7, 1845. She had two daughters—Zenaida Charlotte Julie, born July 8, 1801, died 1854, who became the wife of Lucien Bonaparte's son, the Prince of Canino; and Charlotte Napoleone, born October 31, 1802, died March 3, 1839, who married Louis Napoleon, second son of Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland.

DOLLIE D.—The ancients called the vian the bird of Apollo or of Orpheus, and ascribed to it wonderful musical powers, which it was supposed to exercise particularly when its death approached. It has, in reality, a soft low voice, plaintive and with little variety, which is to be heard chiefly when it is moving about with its young. Still it cannot be classed as a singing bird, but on account of its praisings having been so often sung by both ancient and modern poets it may be rightly considered a bird of song.

A. R. C., whose hair is turning prematurely grey—in front only—is advised to take an iron tonic, and to quit frizzing or banging her hair. This destroys the life of hair. If bangs become you, get some false ones. They look very natural. Brush your hair and rub a little olive oil into it. The hair turns grey through the lack of iron in the blood. "A. R. C." also wishes to be told some masquerade costume—not comic—suitable for a plump, rather short young woman with brown hair and eyes. The gipsy costume is always picturesque—red bodice laced in front, short blue skirt, black stockings and low shoes with red bows. Wear your hair loose or in plaits tied with ribbon; a wide hat, or gipsy straw bonnet with a wreath of red poppies around it. Bead necklace and bracelets, a tambourine—which you can make yourself—and a pack of cards stuck in the pocket of a fancy apron or in your belt.

E. A. A.—1. Cato the Younger, or Cato of Utica, as he is generally termed in history, was born 95 a.c. He served with distinction in a campaign against Spartacus, was military tribune in Macedonia, and afterwards became questor, or treasurer, of Rome, a position which he filled in a most able manner. In 69 a.c. he was elected tribune, and also delivered his famous speech on the Cataline conspiracy, in which he denounced Julius Caesar as an accomplice of that famous conspirator. Crassus and Pompey also came in for a good share of his invective. Notwithstanding this, he became very vacillating later on, and allied himself with Pompey, and undertook the defence of Utica. After hearing of the defeat of Scipio at Thapsus (April 6, 46 a.c.), and finding that resistance was useless, he resolved to die rather than surrender, and accordingly committed suicide by stabbing. He was a brilliant man, but unfortunately too strait-laced in his theories, and showing a total lack of intuition into circumstances which belong to such men as Caesar, Napoleon or Cromwell. 2. Tarchunus Superbus was overthrown in 509 a.c.

AMY.—A cameo is a term applied to a precious stone carved in relief. The art of engraving on gems is of great antiquity, the Egyptians, Greek and Romans having possessed the art, and many specimens of their work still remain, which will never be surpassed in beauty, and which are now valued at very high prices. This art was revived in Italy in the fifteenth century, and is even now practised to a considerable extent. Imitations of these antique cameos are now not uncommon, and are often such beautifully exact copies that it is almost impossible to distinguish the difference between them. In many instances celluloid is thus employed. Cameos are also made from the lip of the helmet-shell—a large, thick shell, which is formed of layers, varying in colour like the onyx. In the true cameo a stone is used, having two layers (and sometimes more) of different colours. The onyx, in particular, as also agate and sard, from the variety of their strata, are peculiarly applicable for this purpose. A head, or group of figures, is carved by the artist from the white layer of stone, leaving the background dark; or else the figures stand up dark and clear, relieved by the snowy background.

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